



**An assessment of the role of the Public Relations strategist in Lesotho**

**by**

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## DECLARATION

I Lerato Maieane, hereby declare that the contents of this thesis represent my work, and all the relevant sources are shown in the reference list. This study has not previously, in its entirety or part, been submitted at any university to obtain an academic qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Date: 03/03/2025

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## **ABSTRACT**

Public Relations (PR) strategists contribute to the achievement of the organisational goals by addressing the societal needs of stakeholders through grafted communication strategies that enhance the stakeholder trust, and good relations with the organisation and in turn influence perception and create a good reputation and image for the organisation. This paper explores the conceptualisation of the PR strategies in Lesotho with multifaceted functions of PR that include stakeholder engagement, brand and reputation management, media relations, crisis management, environmental scanning, development of communication strategy, corporate social responsibility, and budget development. It provides insight into whether the practice of PR role adds value to organisations by contributing to the dominant coalition, corporate strategy development, crisis management, and at the macro-level. Drawing from the reflective paradigm of public relations, the research used a semi-structured interview guide and conducted in-depth interviews with PR practitioners and CEOs in Lesotho from different sectors to understand the conceptualisation of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho. The findings of the study show that the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is largely conceptualised at the managerial, or meso level of the organisation. The majority of PR strategists do not participate in the dominant coalition where decisions are made. PR strategists in Lesotho do not contribute strategically to the attainment of the organisational goals including non-financial goals which contribute to the development of the enterprise strategy. It is recommended that the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho be expanded to the macro level if organisations are to derive maximum value from PR.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Public Relations strategist, Reflective strategist, Reflective paradigm.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Research on Public Relations (PR) roles is argued to be the most theoretically and empirically useful output in the field of Public Relations (Dozier & Broom, 1995). The various roles and tasks of PR practitioners are indicators of their power and reflections of their personal achievements. These roles also provide a lens into the structures and processes of the PR function in organisations as well as the organisation's capacity to cooperate with their environment (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). Most importantly, PR roles are indicative of whether PR is involved in strategic decision-making as part of the dominant coalition or is simply there to implement decisions made by the dominant coalition. Consequently, research on PR roles has been preoccupied with understanding how best and whether PR can add value to organisations. Grunig's Excellence theory of PR is the most popular theory that argues that PR can only add value to organisations when it is strategic.

Research on PR roles suggests that PR adds value to organisations when it is utilised as a strategic function that helps the growth of the organisation's overall strategy and decision-making. (Steyn, & Puth, 2000a; Holmström, 2002; Gilaninia, Taleghani & Mohammadi, 2013; de Poll, Beijer & Alves, 2022). Furthermore, Steyn and Everett, (2009), have also noted that for PR to add value to organisations, senior PR practitioners need to be embraced as part of the dominant coalition that contributes to organisational decision-making. PR practitioners do this by providing counsel that minimises reputational risk, increases good identity, and brings a broader societal perspective (Steyn & Everett 2009:120). For PR to contribute strategically to the attainment of organisational goals, senior PR practitioners ought to be able to advise management on stakeholders' values and norms (Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). This will allow organisations that adjust their policies to suit both the organisation and its stakeholders to prosper (Michael Osinakachukwu Ezech et al., 2024).



The practice of PR has evolved over the years, from where it was seen as a form of media liaison for the organisation to a strategic function within an organisation (Steyn, & Puth, 2000:20). Angelopoulos and Barker (2013) and (Grunig & Kim, 2021), indicate that the technical role is associated with the Press Agency model of public relations, where communication is one-sided from the organisation, it is persuasive, and has very limited feedback from stakeholders. It is believed that, when strategic corporate communication is practised, it can add value by giving management a broader perspective of the environment (Steyn & Everett, 2022).

In light of the shifts in PR roles noted in the literature, scholars worldwide have invested interest and time in studying PR roles. However, globally, research on PR practice in different African countries is not known due to a lack of research and documentation (Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Ngondo and Klyueva, (2020), note that out of 54 African countries, research on PR roles has only been conducted in 8 countries. This contrasts sharply with research in the global North where research on PR roles is more widespread and shows the evolution of these roles from Press agency to a more strategic function (Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler & Meckel, 2009).

In the South African context, Steyn and Puth, (2000) examined whether top management sees corporate communication practitioners as playing a significant role in organisational decision-making. Similarly, Engelbrecht, (2020) study also investigated whether management views PR as a strategic management function in South Africa. In a study done in Ghana, Anani-Bossman (2021) concluded that corporate communication practitioners are still failing to assume the broad view of the organisation as the technical role of PR, dominates practice as opposed to the strategic role. Focusing on Zimbabwe, Ngondo and Klyueva, (2020), argue that there is a clear demarcation between the three PR roles: strategic, managerial, and technical. They further contend that PR is understood and practiced as a strategic function like in Western countries.

Considering this background, this study seeks to contribute to scholarship on PR roles in Africa by examining PR roles in Lesotho. The study specifically seeks to understand how the role of the PR strategist is conceptualised in the country. The study goes further to unpack whether the conceptualisation of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho adds

value to organisations by contributing to decision-making and the enterprise strategy at the macro-organisational level. There are currently very limited studies known to the researcher that have researched PR in Lesotho.

## **1.2 Research problem**

Studies on PR roles have a long history. These studies have sought to understand how best PR can be practised such that it adds value to organisations (Steyn, & Puth, 2000). Grunig's Excellence theory is the most popular theory to emerge from studies on PR roles. It contends that for PR to add more value to organisations it needs to be situated at the macro-level where it contributes to corporate or enterprise strategy. However, a review of the existing literature on this subject, reveals that most studies on PR roles have been carried out in the global North, with very few studies focusing on Africa. Scholars such as Anani-Bossman, (2021), have identified the need to research PR roles in African countries to understand current practice. Very little is understood about PR roles and whether they add value to organisations in countries such as Lesotho. There is an obvious gap in African scholarship about how the role of PR strategist is conceptualised and executed in other African countries beyond South Africa.

## **1.3 Research objective**

- i. To understand how the role of the PR strategist is conceptualised in Lesotho

### **Secondary objectives.**

- ii. To understand the dominant functions of the PR strategist in Lesotho.
- iii. To understand whether the PR strategist in Lesotho adds value to organisations.
- iv. To compare the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho with that of PR strategists in other parts of the world.

## **1.4 Primary research question**

The research objective together with the secondary objectives is pivotal for addressing the main research questions which are:

- How is the role of the PR strategist conceptualised in Lesotho?

### **Sub-questions**

- What are the dominant functions of the PR strategist in Lesotho?
- Does the role of the PR strategist add value to organisations in Lesotho?
- How does the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho compare with that of PR strategists in other parts of the world?

## **1.5 The Significance of the study**

The study will contribute to the existing literature on the conceptualisation of PR roles in Africa. There is currently limited research on PR roles in Africa with most studies having been conducted in South Africa. There are currently no studies known to the researcher that have examined PR roles in Lesotho to understand whether such roles add value to organisations by contributing to the enterprise strategy and decision-making among the dominant coalition.

This study will also contribute towards PR professionals' conceptualisation of their strategic role/function in Lesotho. It will assist them in Lesotho to understand how their practice compares with that of their peers globally and whether it is adding value to the organisations that they work for.

## **1.6 Chapter outline**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction and Background to the Study**

Chapter one outlines the research problem and sets out the objectives and research questions of the study. The chapter also discusses the significance of the study before providing an overview of the chapters.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Chapter two reviews relevant literature on the topic. The chapter reviews the literature on PR roles, the role theory, the excellence theory of PR, and conceptualisations of the role of the PR strategist. Extant literature on PR practice globally and in the African context is also discussed.

### **Chapter 3: Conceptual framework of the study**

This chapter discusses the conceptual framework of the study. It situates the study within the reflective paradigm of PR.

### **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

This chapter outlines and discusses the research methodology and methods. It begins by discussing and justifying the choice of qualitative methods before discussing the specific methods that were used to collect data and how they were used. The chapter proceeds to discuss the sampling methods and procedures followed in the study as well as the data analysis process. The ethical considerations made in the study are also discussed.

### **Chapter 5: Findings and Discussions**

This chapter presents analyses and discusses the study findings in line with the research objectives and questions.

### **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendation**

This chapter provides a summary of the major findings of the study. It proceeds to discuss major insights gleaned from the study before making recommendations on the conceptualisation of the PR strategist in Lesotho.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter reviews pertinent literature that addresses the organisational role of the PR strategist. The chapter reviews the literature on PR roles, the role theory, the excellence theory of PR, and conceptualisations of the role of the PR strategist. In addition, literature on the global PR practices used in African contexts is also discussed for framing purposes.

#### **2.2 Origin of Public Relations Roles**

Public relations roles have evolved from traditional to more strategic communication functions, that are versatile and digital savvy. (Fieseler et al., 2015). This transformation was brought about by new communication technology, including social media, and the need to build strong relationships with stakeholders, from diverse professional and social backgrounds. It also involves doing more than just publicity but incorporating a broader range of communication functions that are important to the organisation's continued existence and success (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Scholars such as Broom and Dozier, (1986) developed four roles of PR: the expert prescriber, the communication facilitator, the problem-solving process facilitator, and the communication technical. These four roles were later evaluated and analysed by scholars and two roles came out of them: the managerial role and the technical role (Steyn & Puth 2000). Subsequent studies contend that the expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem-solving process facilitator play a managerial role and the communication technical did not seem to play any management role (Steyn & Puth 2000).

Broom and Dozier (1986) provide a dichotomy of the managerial role and the technical role. They argue that the managerial role is more involved in decision-making on communication-related issues, development of communication policy, and taking full responsibility for the outcomes of implemented communication programs (Steyn, 2000). The manager conducts communication programs that are based on research and

evaluates them (Steyn, 2000). PR Practitioners in this role consider themselves as experts in the field and are viewed as such, hence the need for accountability in all communication programs that arise within the organisation (Penning & Bain, 2018). The PR manager role facilitates communication between the organisation and its stakeholders using the two-way symmetric model which allows feedback.

The technical role of PR, on the other hand, implements policy and decisions made by others in a manner that has been decided by top management (Penning & Bain, 2018). The technical role is more involved in the production of communication material, journalist skills; writing and editing, liaison with media, implementing communication programs, and not participating in any decision-making meetings (Steyn, 2000). As mentioned before, PR has evolved from being a traditional technical role, to becoming a strategic role that contributes to the achievement of broad and major organisational goals. The following section will evaluate and critique literature on PR functions and practices both globally and more importantly, in Africa.

The Role Theory is defined “as a perspective in sociology and in social psychology that considers most of the everyday activity to be acting out of socially defined categories” (Sesen, 2015: 139). Roles are influenced by social norms in the environment, that is the roles people play and the expectations attached to those positions influence their behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs (Eriş & Kökalan, 2022). Sesen (2015:139) further indicates that “Roles are framed by expectations of the environment, the perception of the person/organisation and the behaviour of the person/organisation”. In organisations, roles are influenced by the position, different roles are played by different position holders to achieve organisational goals (Eriş & Kökalan, 2022). PR's role in an organisation is determined by the organisation's role in the society it operates within. It is further stated that organisations have some basic expectations such as business continuity, financial stability, increasing sales, maintaining a good reputation, and finding employees that will grow the organisation, (Sesen, 2015).

### **2.2.1 The Role Theory in PR**

The Role Theory in public relations is used to understand the relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders, (Sesen, 2015). The establishment and maintenance of good relations with stakeholders have become the instrument to measure the lifespan of an organisation, (Uche *et al.*, 2013). Michael Osinakachukwu Ezech (et al., 2024), further indicate that for the successful implementation of a project, stakeholder analysis plays a critical role in the planning, execution and implementation phases of a project. Therefore, the Role Theory helps PR practitioners identify and understand various stakeholders' needs, concerns, and expectations to develop targeted messages that are engaging and understood. With the use of the role theory, PR practitioners can resolve conflicts by analysing conflicts, and stakeholder differences, and finding a common ground that results in an amicable resolution of conflict, (Uche *et al.*, 2013). The PR practitioner can also use the theory to identify roles among the organisation's stakeholders. Such roles include partnerships or agreements with influencers. These roles are assigned by identifying specific stakeholders that can form a strong coalition to successfully drive the organisation's objectives, (Sesen,2015).

### **2.3 Public relations roles in Africa**

Studies show that PR practice is influenced by culture, and this is very important in the global PR view, as there is a need to move from global isolation to cultural inclusivity (Creedon & Al-Khaja 2019). Merham, Skinner, and Rensburg, (2011), indicate that existing knowledge of PR has been gathered from Western countries. Even though PR is practiced actively in African countries, globally, the practice is not known due to a lack of documentation and limited participation in Global PR forums (Mudzanani & Anani-Bossman, 2023). Out of 54 countries on the continent, the role of PR has been studied in only 8 countries, (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). In response to this state of affairs, Anani-Bossman (2018) and (Nyarko, 2022) emphasise the need to carry out research studies on the practice of PR, noting most importantly that cultural settings influence PR models, and that one model cannot be used across the board.

Scholars such as (Steyn, 2004) and (Meintjes, 2011) have researched PR roles in South Africa. According to Steyn, the PR manager operates at the meso level of the organisation

to assist in carrying out the organisation's strategic goals, (Steyn 2000). PR managers are typically responsible for developing the communication strategy and policy of the organisation, and decide on what should be communicated to stakeholders to solve problems or capitalising on opportunities that may arise (Steyn & Puth 2000). In addition, PR managers are responsible for building communication strategies that align with the organisation's overall strategy, vision, mission, and values. At the micro or execution level, the PR manager's role becomes more technical, (Steyn & Puth 2000). This is typically where PR practitioners implement the communication plan developed by the manager (Steyn & Puth 2000). The technical may not be part of the strategic communication, but communication excellence would be incomplete without this role (Steyn & Puth 2000; Steyn, 2018).

Most senior PR practitioners in South Africa are organisation spokespersons and liaise with media through the provision of information, and by developing communication materials, (Meintjes, 2011). A study carried out by Anani-Bossman (2021) in Ghana shows that PR practitioners are still failing to assume the broad view of the organisation as the technical role of PR still dominates the overall PR practice. As observed by (Meintjes, 2011), Steyn, (2009) also notes that PR practice in South Africa does not contribute to the achievement of organisational goals by providing strategic direction in managing reputation or communication with strategic stakeholders.

Meintjes (2011), indicates that the technician and manager's roles are the most dominant roles practised in the Common Monetary Area (CMA). CMA countries include Lesotho, South Africa, Eswatini, and Namibia. Meintjes (2011), further points out that top management wishes corporate communication practitioners could practice the strategic role of corporate communication. Nyarko, (2022), indicates that in African countries, especially in the public sector, PR functions are largely carried out by middle-level and junior officers whereas in private sector there is a designated department.

However, Ngondo and Klyueva, (2020) and Van Heerden and Rensburg, (2005) assert that in Africa, the role of corporate communication is a strategic one that contributes to the decision-making processes of corporate strategy. Van Heerden and Rensburg, (2005), further highlight that there is a clear distinction between the strategic role of public



relations and the technical role of public relations in Africa, however, there is a blurred line between the managerial and the technical roles of PR. (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020), argue that in Zimbabwe there is a clear demarcation between the three roles of corporate communication; that is the strategic role, the managerial role, and the technical role, and that corporate communication is understood and practised as a strategic function like it is practised in the western countries. Based on the literature, the practice of PR in Africa is mixed according to Broom and Dozier (1986) of managerial role and technical role and seems to be dominant in the technical role.

## **2.4 Global research on PR roles**

Research on PR roles has been carried out by many scholars globally, with the objective to understand the contribution of such roles towards successful achievement of the organisation's goals. Studies also reveal how PR roles shape communication strategies and adaptation to the evolving societal change and technology. Scholars such as Fieseler, Lutz & Meckel, 2015 carried out a study on an inquiry into the transformation of the PR roles' concept, Vieira and Grantham, (2014) carried out a study on defining public relations roles in the USA. Using cluster analysis, Tugce and Eyun-Jung, (2020) carried out a study on the Roles and Functions of Public Relations Practitioners in the Resolution of Conflicts in the U.S. and Turkey.

It is believed that PR role positions are influenced by gender, professional experience, education, and PR staff size (Fieseler, Lutz & Meckel, 2015). The managerial role of PR in Europe is influenced by education and work experience, not gender even though there are more males in the execution role; managerial role, (Fieseler, Lutz & Meckel, 2015). Vieira and Grantham, (2014), in their study, indicate that American PR practitioners are more educated in writing skills as they have acquired degrees in journalism and English whereas their European counterparts have degrees in various sectors such as humanities, communication, business, and PR-related certificates.

Practitioners of public relations are essential in the managerial role of the resolution of disputes in both Turkey and the United States, (Tugce & Eyun-Jung, 2020). In the US, they mediate disputes between parties, promoting communication and mutual respect to reach an agreement. To control how conflicts are seen by the general public and lessen

unfavourable effects, they also participate in strategic communication. To distribute accurate information and positively affect public opinion, public relations professionals in Turkey put a strong emphasis on developing connections with important stakeholders, including media outlets, community leaders, and government officials (Tugce & Eyun-Jung, 2020). However, in both areas, It could be difficult to manage heated public opinions and deeply established ideological divisions in the United States and Turkey there is limited press and expression freedom that may obstruct attempts at unbiased and open communication (Tugce & Eyun-Jung, 2020).

In Malaysia, Senior public relations practitioners on the other hand are only useful, especially during crisis management for media liaison and communication programs (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). The dominant coalition has a negative opinion of the public relations team's dedication to research, monitoring, and environmental scanning. It is further indicated that, in the strategic planning team, the job of senior public relations as media and communication counsel is ongoing; however, this position is only recognised when a crisis occurs (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). The senior public relations manager still takes on more of a technical role, particularly in their roles as communication liaisons and media relations experts, (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017).

The practice of PR in Europe and America is dominated by the managerial role of PR (Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Beurer-Zuellig, et al, 2009). The managerial function involves conducting research and developing PR strategies that are aligned with the corporate strategy. It focuses on both internal and external stakeholders as they contribute strategically to the corporate strategy and decision-making (Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Beurer-Zulling et al., 2009). Fieseler, Lutz, and Meckel, (2015) indicate that in Europe the managerial role is defined by a “diagnosis” factor. This is where stakeholders' information and demands are shared in the organisation which helps decision-makers to make informed strategic decisions.

Mellado and Barría, (2012), indicate that in Latin America, PR roles are grouped into four types: the long-term strategic, the short-term technical, the passive-complaisant, and the active vigilant. The long-term strategic role is popular, and it allows the practitioner to have an overall perspective of the corporation and its environment. This role puts the

organisation's reputation first and as a result, strives to create a good relationship with trust between the organisation and its public and stakeholders (Mellado & Barría, 2012). Practitioners in this role also develop long-term strategies to anticipate possible contingencies (Mellado & Barría, 2012). There is consensus in the literature that the global practice of PR practice resonates with the managerial role dichotomy of Broom and Dozier (1986). However, in Malaysia, the dominant practice is the technical role as the dominant coalition has a negative opinion of the public relations team's dedication to research, monitoring, and environment scanning.

## **2.5 The excellent practice of PR roles**

Researchers carried out studies in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to determine how public relations can contribute to the effectiveness of the organisation and at the same time provide for the needs and expectations of stakeholders. They further looked into what attributes contribute to an excellent communication department that is how functions should be organised, structured, and practiced and these studies led to the conceptualisation of excellence theory, (Grunig & Grunig, 2003).

The excellence theory indicates that for an organisation to be effective it needs to be able to solve problems with its stakeholders in an amicable manner that benefits both the organisation and its stakeholders (Grunig, 2011). It further indicates that there is a need to conduct environmental scanning to be able to know who and how stakeholders will be affected by the organisational decision (Grunig, 2008). It is further highlighted that to create long-term relationships of quality with stakeholders, organisations need to apply the symmetrical model of communication (Grunig, 2008).

The excellence theory of PR is defined as “a set of attributes and practices that helped to build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies” Grunig & Grunig, (2003:328). In today's life, there is an emphasis on the importance of incorporating stakeholders in the organisations' choices and operations as this relates to the social license to operate. The inclusion of stakeholders in organisational choices equally relates to the decisions made about the use of certain kinds of communication inside, from and about impact-oriented organisations (Weder, 2022). To address the diversity of agonistic voices in stakeholder engagement processes in social, cultural, and environmental

transformations, the strategic problem of sustainability for transformation as an innovative approach to public relations (PR) is recommended, (Weder, 2022).

For a PR practitioner to add value to an organisation's effectiveness, the practitioner must possess the skills of being able to solve organisational problems in an amicable manner that is beneficial to both the organisation and its stakeholders, (Edafejirhaye & Alao, 2019). A skilful PR practitioner needs to effectively engage stakeholders, identify, understand and address their needs and concerns and be in apposition to know how management decisions will affect such stakeholders, (Michael Osinakachukwu Ezech et al., 2024). It is, therefore, important for public relations practitioners to have varied skills in crisis management, stakeholder engagement, and ethical decision-making, that extends beyond traditional communication methods, (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019).

As was indicated earlier in the literature, PR roles are shifting from the traditional practice to a more strategic practice of PR due to among others, global markets and evolving technology. It is therefore imperative that senior PR professionals be capable of promoting the incorporation of digital and social media experience, data analytics, cross-cultural communication abilities, and strategic foresight (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). It is indicated that with the availability of big data and analytics, the monitoring and evaluation of public relations initiatives have improved, allowing for more data-driven decision-making, (Grunig, 2009). It is further pointed out that interactive platforms and social media have given stakeholders the ability to communicate directly with companies, enabling two-way communication and engagement, and that the line between traditional and user-generated material has blurred, making it difficult for public relations professionals to navigate in an increasingly complex media landscape, (Grunig, 2009).

To achieve excellent practice of Public relations (Rhee, 2004) states that Vercic, James Grunig, and Larissa Grunig 1996, developed principles that constitute excellence in public relations. Public relations must be involved in strategic management and be part of the decision-making process, (Grunig, 2008). This strategic move will help public relations practitioners develop communication plans for key stakeholders both inside and internationally (Grunig, 2011). It is further indicated that all public relations tasks should be combined into a single department and that Senior public relations should be kept

apart from other departments (Grunig, 2008). The use of PR as a supplement tool for other departments splits the PR function and communication to the strategic public is not as effective (Rhee, 2004). Nyarko, (2022) indicate that in African countries especially in the private sector PR functions are performed from a designated department of communications.

To achieve excellent public relations, the position of senior PR should be held by qualified knowledgeable persons who have managerial and symmetrical PR skills and for daily communication activities, communication technicians are suitable for the position, (Rhee, 2004 & Grunig & Grunig, 2003). The Senior PR should be knowledgeable in the field, involved in professional organisations, and show interest in specialised literature work in excellent programs (Rhee, 2004).

The two-way symmetrical PR model should be used to achieve the excellent practice of PR, the use of the model manages the organisation's conflict and fosters better understanding with the strategic public (Grunig & Kim, 2021). It is also stated that decentralised management systems in excellent businesses give employees liberty and enable them to take part in decision-making (Rhee, 2004). Again, participative and symmetrical internal communication with employees improves job satisfaction because their goals become integrated into the organisational mission (Rhee, 2004).

The PR department needs to be varied in terms of gender, race, and culture, to name a few. According to the notion of necessary variety, successful companies must have as much internal diversity as they do external diversity (Rhee, 2004). All jobs in excellent public relations are filled by men and women, as well as professionals from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. For PR to be practised in an Organisation with perfection, the culture must be participative rather than dictatorial, and the structure must be natural (Grunig, 2008). Environmental activism, participative rather than authoritarian cultures, and organic rather than mechanical management structures all support the growth of excellent public relations departments (Grunig, 2008).

## **2.6 PR roles associated with excellent PR and the strategist role**

Studies have shown that for organisations to practice excellent Public relations, there is a need to have a skilful public relations manager (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). The PR managers should inherit skills in crisis management, engage stakeholders, and have ethical decision-making (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019).

### **2.6.1 Crisis management**

Public relations is a function within an organisation that can manage the relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders (Abdullahi, 2019). The managerial role of public relations is emphasised in public relations literature as having an impact on crisis management decision-making (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). As a managerial function, the public relations strategist is essential as a facilitator of dispute resolution. They conduct environmental scanning and monitoring to find problems before adjusting to the organisation's objective (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). At the World Assembly of the Public Relations Association in 1978, it was established and agreed that the PR function has the capabilities of analysing trends within the organisation's environment, predicting the impact of those trends on the organisation's operation. Based on the above, the PR professionals can then provide solutions/ counselling to management and implement planned programmes of action which serve both the organisation and its stakeholder(s). (Abdullahi, 2019). Therefore, the PR strategist's advisory role during crisis management contributes significantly to the intention and action of accountability, transparency, and integrity of the organisation's response (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017).

During a crisis, the role of PR strategists should be to turn negatives into positives for the benefit of both the organisation and its stakeholders, to build relationships, and to protect the corporate reputation, (Tonga, 2020). According to Frank Jefkins' 1988 model, the PR strategist should be able to transfer: Hostility to Sympathy, Prejudice to Acceptance, Apathy to Interest, and Ignorance to Knowledge, (Tonga, 2020).

According to Tonga, (2020), for a crisis to be managed effectively, the PR strategist should be able to apply the PR crisis management techniques. The techniques comprise issue management, crisis communication plan, crisis communication center,

organisations' representatives, and external consultancies whose skills are required for the management of a crisis (Tonga, 2020).

The application of this technique has proven to be successful in resolving the 2008 crisis that the Nigerian stock exchange experienced and it is also compatible with the Frank Jefkins transfer model results (Tonga, 2020). However, in Malaysia, Senior public relations are only useful, especially during crisis management for media liaison and communication programs (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). The dominant coalition has a negative opinion of the public relations team's dedication to research, monitoring, and environmental scanning. It is further indicated that, in the strategic planning team, the job of senior public relations as media and communication counsel is ongoing; however, this position is only recognised when a crisis occurs (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017).

### **2.6.2 Stakeholder engagement using new media**

Social media is a powerful tool that allows organisations to engage with their stakeholders timely and it facilitates immediate feedback as it features the two-way symmetrical model (Fissi et al., 2022). PR strategists strive to build and maintain a good relationship with the organisation's stakeholders and create a positive reputation through constant and transparent communication while addressing their needs and expectations (Michael Osinakachukwu Ezech et al., 2024). It is further indicated that proactive engagement of stakeholders builds trust and loyalty, and therefore minimises conflicts (Michael Osinakachukwu Ezech et al., 2024). Excellent PR practice requires constant environmental scanning to stay in touch with the organisations' stakeholders' social needs and expectations. PR strategists, therefore, should be capable of using technology to understand stakeholders' attitudes, behaviour, and beliefs (Vieira & Grantham, 2014).

PR strategists leverage digital communication as a way to efficiently engage with their stakeholders in real-time, (Rahman, 2019). These digital channels allow PR professionals to engage with organisation stakeholders timely and regularly while increasing brand recognition and the image of the organisation (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013). It is, therefore, of paramount importance for the PR strategist to conduct research that helps them to know organisations' stakeholders and determine which communication platform will resonate with different stakeholders (Smith, 2020). For example, government entities

are using social media as a formal communication channel to engage with their stakeholders and it has since proven that crucial messages or developments can be communicated in real time and feedback be received, (Kuźniar & Szopiński, 2016).

On the other hand, other organisations use websites to communicate with their stakeholders, however, websites only facilitate on-way communication (Cooper, 2003). It does not allow communication between stakeholders and the organisation to be interactive (Cooper, 2003). Social media applications such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn are widely used because they are considered to be easy to use, interactive, convenient, and inexpensive, (Kuźniar & Szopiński, 2016). Unlike the limitations of websites, social media has been identified as a communication tool that can enhance relationship-building due to its interactive features (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013).

The advantage of using this borderless communication is that communication can be delivered consistently across cultures and time zones. The Internet allows the delivery of similar messages to stakeholders from different cultures and time zones at the same time (Angelopoulos and Barker 2013). For example, public relations practitioners can use social media to send out press releases to journalists at the same time regardless of their location, even use it to host media briefings using meeting applications such as Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Team, and others (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Social media channel has a two-way communication feature that allows immediate feedback from recipients of information. Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, create, discuss, and modify user-generated content, (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media can be networking sites, social bookmarking sites, social sites, video-sharing communities, photo-sharing sites, professional network sites, web-based encyclopaedias, community answer sites, and blog networking community states (Cosmo, 2008) (Angelopoulos and Barker 2013). Social media allows receivers to like, share, and tag (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard 2013)

Using the Internet and online services is a strategic way to reduce barriers between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders, (Angelopoulos and Barker 2013).



Social media in public relations plays a strategic role because social media is interactive, participatory, collaborative personal, and simultaneously communal and this feature allows public relations practitioners to be in constant conversation, supportive behaviour, and meaningful relationships (Men & Tsai 2014) in (Wang 2015). While there may be advantages to the use of new technology, especially social media to enhance the PR function of keeping stakeholders engaged, there are disadvantages that have been highlighted by (Walsh et al., 2021; Rahman, 2019; Kuźniar & Szopiński, 2016). There is a lack of privacy of data, especially in healthcare centres (Walsh et al., 2021). Management of social media requires a dedicated PR strategist who pays attention to details, as a small slip might create a lost opportunity or create a crisis, among others (Rahman, 2019; Kuźniar & Szopiński, 2016). There is also a lack of social media strategy and there is a high chance of excluding other stakeholders who do not have access to social media, (Rahman, 2019).

### **2.6.3 Ethical decision-making**

Ethical decision-making in the practice of excellent public relations is important for protecting credibility, generating trust, and developing long-term partnerships with the organisation's stakeholders (Public Relations Society of America, 2024). It involves making decisions that are not only legally sound, but also consistent with moral norms such as transparency, honesty, justice, and accountability (Public Relations Society of America, 2024). Therefore, the PR strategist is critical in ensuring that ethical considerations govern the formulation and implementation of communication strategy.

However, Public relations practitioners are faced with a dilemma when responsibilities conflict with loyalty and a decision has to be made. Rhee, (2004), points out that management may structure PR in such a way that its function suits management positively. The public relations function advocates for mutual relations between an organisation and its stakeholders, which eliminates organisational reputational risk, hence the need for the PR strategist to have ethical practices, (Farmer, 2018).

A PR strategist is responsible for crafting and guiding an organisation's communication policies and messages while navigating complex ethical challenges. In this role, the strategist needs to be a professional with ethical leadership skills, who is also able to counsel management on ethical practices of communication to consider when making decisions (Bowen, 2004). The ethical practice of communication will earn the organisation long-term relationships and have a positive impact on reputation, thus creating stakeholders' trust and public perception, (Farmer, 2018). It is further indicated that the PR strategist's role is to identify ethical risks and develop strategies that mitigate risks to protect the organisation's reputation while balancing the organisation's stakeholders' needs and expectations and that of the organisation, (Bowen, 2004). For PR strategists to achieve the ethical practice of PR, they must adhere to public relations professional codes of conduct, (Public Relations Society of America, 2024).

The Public Relations Society of America (2024) developed a step-by-step ethical decision-making guide for the ethical practice of PR: 1). Defining the ethical issue or conflict, 2). Identify both internal and external factors that may influence the decision, 3). Identify key values, 4). Identify stakeholders who may be affected by the decision made and define public relations professional obligation to each segment of stakeholders, 5). Select the best ethical principles to guide the decision-making process, and 6). And decide with justification (Farmer, 2018).

#### **2.6.4 Dominant Coalition**

A Dominant Coalition refers to the management of the organisation, they have power and they control the organisation's activities at a strategic level to achieve organisational goals, (Engelbrecht & Ferreira, 2022). Studies indicate that it is important for PR strategists to have a seat or have a direct reporting relationship with members of the dominant coalition where strategic decisions are made. (Rhee, 2004). It is also of paramount importance to include the public relations function in the decision-making team, this will allow the PR strategist to perform its role as a counsellor to management when it comes to stakeholders' issues, norms, and needs and advise on how decisions on policies will impact on them, (Steyn, 2009 & Weder, 2022)

The PR strategist's role is to protect the image and reputation of the organisation by identifying risks, crisis response, and communicating effectively with stakeholders and this will be achieved through advising management to be considerate of reputation risks in every decision they take (Grunig et al., 2003). It is further indicated that the PR strategist's role is to know the insights of the organisation's stakeholders' perceptions, expectations, and social needs and address them through communication techniques (Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi, 2005). As a result, a seat in the decision-making team will enable the PR strategist to ensure synergy between the organisation's strategies and policies, and the public perception. The strategist can further ensure that there is clarity and consistency in message deliverance and that the message reaches the right stakeholders, (Cornelissen, 2020).

Public relations strategists have the skill to predict prospective problems and can address issues before they become crises, having them in the dominant coalition, will help to contribute to preventive crisis management and provide real-time feedback when problems develop (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). To maintain and protect the image and reputation of the organisation PR strategists will guide the dominant coalition, in ways to foster transparency, authenticity, and accountability, which are essential for long-term success and maintaining good relations with stakeholders (Grunig et al., 2003).

Executive management has power that can affect the functions of PR either positively or negatively in terms of optimal performance of excellent practice of PR (Rhee, 2004). Due to the power and control that is inherent with the dominant coalition, they might structure PR in a way that self-interest in power and control and also depending on how they perceive PR functions will determine the model of communication to be used by the organisation (Rhee, 2004).

According to Engelbrecht and Ferreira (2022), scholars indicate that public relations autonomy is an important aspect of strategic management. Public relations practitioners should therefore, be able to engage with the CEO directly, participate in strategic management and planning, and make choices without layers of bureaucracy. In their empirical study among 100 JSE-listed companies, all 10 senior PR practitioners

mentioned that they do not have a seat in the decision-making team, but their opinions are respected even though they are not always implemented.

In a study carried out for a Malaysian energy company it was established that the senior public relations practitioner is only useful during crisis management, to liaise with media and perform communication activities (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). Cases like this suggest that the dominant coalition has a negative opinion of the public relations team's dedication to research, monitoring, and environmental scanning. It is further indicated that, in the strategic planning team, the job of senior public relations as media and communication counsel is ongoing; however, this position is only recognised when a crisis occurs (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). The senior public relations manager still takes on a more technical role, particularly in their roles as communication liaisons and media relations experts (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework of the study. It locates the role of the PR strategist within the broader reflective paradigm of PR. The chapter discusses how the reflective paradigm relates to PR strategies and also describes barriers and impacts faced by organisations adopting the reflective paradigm.

#### **3.2 The reflective paradigm of PR**

The role of the PR strategist should be understood within the broader scheme of the reflective paradigm of PR. According to Holmström, (2002), the reflective paradigm in PR is concerned with the environment of the organisation. It suggests that the organisation should be able to see itself from outside and within the society it operates (Holmström 2002). It facilitates a poly-contextual worldview (Holmström & Kjaerbeck, 2007). For an organisation to see itself within society, there should be a mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders, (Holmstrom, and Kjaerbeck, 2007). The mutual recognition of each party's role within society creates a long-term relationship that guarantees the existence of the organisation. A mutually respectful and beneficial organisation-stakeholder relationship contributes immensely to the success of the organisation (Cornelissen, 2020). The reflective PR paradigm, therefore, emphasises that organisations need to cater to stakeholders and societal expectations, values, norms, and standards, (Jaiya et al., 2022).

Holmström (2002), further indicates that organisations need to practice an open system approach where the environment informs the organisation decisions. It is indicated when an organisation operates a multifocal system, can adjust to the environment and solve problems as they prevail, (Hazy et al., 2011). It is further indicated that when an

organisation operates at a porous boundaries level of the organisation there is free movement of communication between the environment and organisation where the throughput process is catered for, that is, allowing input from the environment, process, and send it out to the environment as output with the expectation of feedback that can either be positive or negative, (Hazy et al., 2011). Roach (2016), further adds that in this context, organisations that adjust their policies to the environment survive and prosper, whereas those that do not adjust it become highly unlikely for them to survive.

Consequently, for contemporary organisations to operate reflectively, they need to have a PR practitioner who can facilitate the interest of both the stakeholders and the organisation, the PR/reflective strategist (Holmstrom & Kjaerbeck, 2007). The Reflective paradigm positions the PR/reflective strategist as a critical role in aligning evolving societal standards, expectations, values, and norms, with organisational norms and values, thus building PR as a socially responsible behaviour of organisations with a socially legitimate reputation, (Heerden & Rensburg 2005:72 (Verčič et al., 2001). The Reflective paradigm shapes how organisations should communicate and view themselves in an environment full of instability. In this regard, Holmstrom and Kjaerbeck (2007), indicate that organisations should be sensitive to the environment and have contingent self-observation. Steyn (2009), affirms that the role of the PR strategist is indeed to execute this function.

### **3.3 Conceptualising the role of the PR strategist/reflective strategist**

It is indicated that the EBOK's reflective and PR strategists are conceptually and pragmatically similar, (Steyn, 2009). The European practice of PR is reflective, (Anon, 2005). The reflective role of PR involves the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) of organisations as it is said it increases legitimacy within society (Anon, 2005). EBOK identified the functions of the reflective PR as for senior PR practitioners to analyse societal changes and discuss with the dominant coalition for adjustments to policies and values of the organisation, (Steyn, 2009). The Reflective PR also aims at developing organisational strategies or mission and the practised communication is inward, (Steyn, 2009).

On the other hand, (Steyn, 2009), indicates that the South African strategist operates at a macro level of an organisation, and conducts environment scanning to gain an in-depth understanding and knowledge of the organisation's stakeholders, public, and most pertinent issues. The strategist then processes information and shares it with the dominant coalition, uses the outside-in approach, contributes strategically to the enterprise strategy, and performs the mirror function (Steyn, 2009).

Building on European literature about the reflective strategist, Steyn (2009) contends that the PR strategist should be viewed as an informed professional who provides management with insights on societal values, norms, and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behaviour. Steyn (2009) notes that the reflective strategist is also an advocate for the organisation's stakeholders, as they are responsible for explaining the impact of the organisation's policies and strategies. Stakeholders' social needs to be taken into account during the development and amendment of organisational policies, as stakeholders can contribute positively or negatively towards the organisation's goals (Grunig, 2008).

The reflective strategist evades conflict between the organisation and its stakeholders and where conflict arises, approaches it mindfully, in order to protect the organisation's reputation in relation to its stakeholders, (Steyn, 2009). The strategist also establishes new relationships and maintains them for the success of the organisation, (Tonga, 2020). According to Steyn, (2009), the reflective strategist manages issues before they become crises, creates a platform between the organisation and its stakeholders, and makes management aware of the importance of viewing issues from different perspectives.

The reflective strategist monitors the environment and acts as the immediate line of contact between the organisation and its stakeholders by explaining stakeholders' expectations, norms, and values to the organisation's management, while making them aware of the organisation's policies and the impact on strategic stakeholders while achieving the organisational goals, (Steyn, 2009).

### **3.4 The Reflective strategist's contribution to the development of a strategy**

Steyn & Niemann, (2010), suggest that enterprise strategy is a relevant approach to incorporating societal and stakeholder expectations, values, norms, and standards into the organisation's strategy development process. Organisations develop enterprise strategies within the context of enterprise governance as a means to achieve non-financial goals. These are important for the organisation's sustainability, (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). It is indicated that PR assumes a strategic role at the organisation's macro level and in the development of the enterprise strategy. In the development of a corporate strategy, the role of PR is more supportive, (Steyn & Niemann, 2014).

The enterprise strategy creates linkages between the value of the organisation and its managers, the expectations of its stakeholders, and societal issues which will determine its ability to sell products (Steyn & Niemann 2010). Enterprise strategy is the analysis of issues related to the values, social issues, and stakeholder expectations from the management of an organisation, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). For an organisation to operate effectively within its environment, it needs to have an enterprise strategy, (Steyn & De Beer, 2012 b). Organisation survival depends on the relationship between an organisation's values and its managers, the expectations of its stakeholders, and societal issues which will determine its ability to sell organisation products and services, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

Enterprise strategy can either be Bridging or Buffering. The former focuses on the satisfaction of external stakeholders even exceeding expectations, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). Strategic management responds to the ever-changing environment to meet the needs of stakeholders (Steyn & De Beer, 2012). Management decisions on policy revision are informed by the external environment, the thinking is outside in. Buffering is thinking inside-out, resistance to change, and organisational policies influence the external environment so that it does not interfere with internal operations, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

Therefore, the Reflective strategist strives to build relationships and protect corporate reputation by informing and engaging with internal and external stakeholders regularly with transparent communication, (Pennin & Bain, 2018). For the strategist to inform top



management of the findings in the environment regarding stakeholders and societal issues, needs to be a member of the decision-making team, (Steyn & Bütschi, 2004). The PR strategist further advises management to adjust its strategies to meet stakeholders, and societal expectations and behave ethically and responsibly to obtain trust and legitimacy which is for a good reputation, (Steyn & Bütschi, 2004).

The reflective strategist needs to inherit skills that proactively anticipate changes within the environment to contribute strategically to the development of the enterprise strategy (Angelopoulos and Barker 2013). With the gathered information from stakeholders, the strategist should be in a position to assess their expectations, values, norms, and standards, then advise the dominant coalition on risk to reputation, their impact on the organisation, and the importance of adjusting the organisation's strategy and policies to accommodate stakeholders' norms and values (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). To maintain a good reputation and license to operate, the reflective strategist recommends to management appropriate actions that will be accepted by stakeholders (Steyn, 2018).

According to (Steyn & Niemann, 2010), societal expectations, values, standards, and norms are mostly seen in corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate governance, good corporate citizenship, sustainability, and the triple bottom line.

### **3.4.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

For organisations to meet stakeholders' and societal expectations, and to uphold their values, norms and standards, they need to display their social responsibility towards the environment, stakeholders and society at large (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). Based on the study carried out in South Africa among PR practitioners, stakeholder engagement is seen as most relevant in the context of corporate social responsibility (Jaiya et al., 2022). The PR reflective paradigm is visible where stakeholders are engaged during the planning and implementation phase of CSR, (Jaiya et al., 2022). In their study, it was found that stakeholder engagement plays a critical role in CSR and forces stakeholder engagement, transparent communication the use of symmetrical communication between the organisation and its stakeholders (Jaiya et al., 2022)

### **3.4.2 Corporate Governance**

Corporate governance is a tool that manages the interests of organisations and its stakeholders through a set of laws, procedures, and processes (Banda & Mwange, 2023). Corporate governance caters to the needs of the organisations; stakeholders manage the corporate plans, and internal processes, and evaluate performance and corporate transparency while striving to achieve the organisation's goals (Banda & Mwange, 2023). According to the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa, (2009:5), corporate governance recognises integrated reporting that does not concentrate on financials only, but on how the organisation's operations have economically affected the community it operates within either positively or negatively, and how the organisation plans to enhance the positive effect and eradicate the negative one.

Institute of Directors in Southern Africa, (2009), advocates for integrated thinking which includes the following.

- The organisation should feel like a part of the society it operates within.
- The organisation should operate from a stakeholder inclusive approach
- Sustainable development; and Integrated reporting.

While worth taking into consideration stakeholders' needs, expectations, and values, they have to be prioritised based on the interest of the organisation on a long-term basis (IoDSA, 2016:25). Organisations that seem to consider their stakeholder's norms and values into consideration are said to have quality relationships with their stakeholders (IoDSA, 2016). According to the Institute of Directors in Southern Africa, (2009), the board of directors should appreciate that stakeholders can influence the operation of the organisation positively or negatively, therefore, there should be a manager who proactively directs stakeholder relationships and accounts for their needs. At the same time, the manager should take the achievement of the organisation's goals into consideration. Therefore, Steyn and Niemann (2014) recommend that the reflective strategist should gather information about the social needs of stakeholders and advise management on how they are accommodated in the operations of the organisation. Institute of Directors in Southern Africa, (2009), further indicating that trust and confidence

contribute to good relationships with stakeholders, therefore, effective management of conflicts where they are resolved on timely, using transparent communication plays a critical role.

### **3.4.3 Good corporate citizenship**

(Marx & Van Dyk, 2011), (Visser, 2005) and (Steyn & Niemann, 2010) all characterise good corporate citizenship as the way that organisations meet the expectations of their stakeholders and society at large; regarding social, economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

### **3.4.4 Sustainability**

The ability of an organisation's operations to meet current stakeholder needs, expectations, values, and norms without compromising to meet the needs of future stakeholders, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

### **3.4.5 The Triple Bottom Line**

The Triple Bottom Line is the approach that an organisation takes when making decisions in regard to values, ethics, societal expectations, issues, and process that minimise any harm resulting from the operational activities, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

In the past the practice of PR was the representation of the organisation to the external environment through the use of the public information model of PR, comparative to the new century, PR practice, involves environmental scanning and programme research, that is gathering of information from the environment process, discuss with the dominant coalition and send back to the environment addressing changes, norms, and values, (Steyn, & Puth, 2000). Stakeholders need to be engaged in organisation activities, especially in the formation of organisational policies and strategies. To achieve this activity, organisations need a PR reflective who acts as a bridge between the outside and inside of the organisation, (Steyn & Niemann, 2014).

### **3.5 The practice of the reflective strategist**

The reflective strategist role is seen during the development of the enterprise strategy through the identification of values, management of reputation, implementation of good corporate governance practices, and fulfillment of social and environmental obligations (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). Through this practice, organisations set to achieve non-financial goals and in return gain trust from their stakeholders and be seen as a legitimate, viable, and socially responsible organisation by society at large, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006).

Through the capability of the reflective strategist of being able to gather information about the organisation's stakeholders on values and norms, the PR strategist informs the dominant coalition on the environmental developments regarding reputation, risks, and effects of organisations strategies on stakeholders and advises on the need to align organisation strategies and goals with stakeholders needs, values and norms by adopting the role of an objective outsider (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). In an effort for an organisation to be socially and ecologically responsible, the reflective strategist recommends action to be taken to address stakeholders and societal issues, maintain a solid reputation, and have a social permit to operate (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). This process then is classified as a strategic function of the organisation's decision-making, especially in the development of the enterprise strategy (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

An organisation's license to operate is based on its corporate social performance, therefore it is the responsibility of the reflective strategist of PR to define the organisation's responsibilities to the dominant coalition regarding stakeholders and their social issues and recommend adoption to address their societal issues, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). Organisation corporate social performance is reflected in the social impact, programs, and policies (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). The reflective strategist contributes strategically to the organisational goal achievement through advice given to the management of adopting the Triple Bottom Line approach not just concentrating on profit gains, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006). This influences management's perspective on the organisation's role in society to take into account and adapt to societal and stakeholder expectations, values, and norms, (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). By so doing, the organisation's management will

gain legitimacy on output that is consistent with societal value patterns (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

PR function plays a strategic role in the organisation where it creates a balance between the organisation's values, and the expectations of stakeholders on societal issues (Steyn & De Beer 2012). The ability of an organisation to sell its products or operate in its environment is achieved by aligning organisational behaviour and strategies to the changing expectations, values, norms, and standards of stakeholders and the societal environment (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). The reflective strategist thereof plays a vital role in maintaining the organisational relationship with its environment, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).

The reflective strategist helps the organisation to implement the bridging strategy to accommodate the shifting social and societal expectations to promote conformance to the expectations (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). This adaptation to changes minimises the organisation's reputational risks and increases the organisation's interactions with external stakeholders and societal interest groups, and changes the viewpoint of the dominant coalition regarding beliefs and attitudes towards external stakeholders (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). The role of the reflective strategist is to work with the dominant coalition to integrate governance, social and environmental concerns into the organisation's business plan, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). The Triple Bottom Line approach to decision-making encourages non-financial concepts such as corporate governance, CSR, good corporate citizenship, and sustainability to be discussed both internally and externally to address values, ethics, societal expectations, problems, and procedures that minimises harm and create economic, social and environmental value (Steyn & Niemann, 2014).

Steyn and Niemann, (2010) indicate that legislative measures that address societal expectations, values, norms, and standards (like the Sarbanes Oxley Act in the US and the Employment Equity and BEE Acts in SA), the strategist also recognises, provide advice on, and communicates about non-legislative measures (like King III), reporting frameworks (like GRI and SRI), and voluntary codes of conduct/recommendations. Even though the PR function plays such as significant role in the attainment of the

organisational goals, there are still barriers that hinder the strategic practice of PR at a macro level.

### **3.6 Barriers that hinder the practice of the reflective strategist**

The role of PR has been explained in the literature and its contribution to the attainment of organisational goals when it is practised strategically, however, some challenges hinder the strategic practice of PR in organisations, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006). It is indicated that senior PR practitioners are failing to assume a broader corporate vision, they do not seem to be able to provide management with strategic direction when it comes to reputation management and relationship management of strategic stakeholders of the organisation, (Steyn, 2009). There is room for a senior PR practitioner to make a strategic contribution towards the achievement of organisational goals, however, this privilege has to be acquired by indicating a grasp of business-related concerns (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006).

In the United States PR is seen as a strategic function and it is supported by the senior management, however, in South Africa, the PR function is seen as a communication function that transmits message information on behalf of the organisation to stakeholders, (Steyn, 2009). PR does not participate directly in the decision-making as it is seen as peripheral to policy making (Steyn, 2009). It is further noted that the communication function is seen as a support function to other departments, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006).

Another barrier that hinders the practice of PR at a strategic level is lack of mentorship, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006). It appeared that mentoring was crucial for job growth. Since the communication function was thought to be somewhat unfriendly, practitioners required help. The practitioners had corporate mentors, but none had a mentor in strategic communication and they attempted to close this gap using alternative strategies, including education (Steyn, 2009). To assume the position of a more senior communication practitioner responsibilities, education is not a requirement, however, it is suggested that schooling should provide practitioners with useful knowledge that will in their progression to more senior posts, particularly after practitioners reach the managerial level in their professions (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006).

One other barrier in the attainment of the organisation's achieve excellent PR practice is encroachment (Papilaya et al., 2018). There are three different types of encroachment: when the PR department is under the control of other departments within an organisational structure, it is known as structural encroachment; when personnel or non-public relations units perform the work that public relations do, this is known as functional encroachment; and encroachment authority involves assigning the incorrect personnel to manage the public relations department (Papilaya et al., 2018). Any kind of invasion, including unsuitable interference or falsely claimed achievements, was seen adversely by practitioners and those who had not experienced encroachment thought that someone employed with such power would not stay since they could not do their jobs well (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006).

Having access to the dominant coalition enables practitioners to learn more about business, expand their business knowledge, and establish their reputation (Grunig et al., 2003). It is further indicated that PR practitioners feel motivated when knowing of the possibility of playing the senior PR role at the macro level where decisions are made, but most PR practitioners are not part of the dominant coalition, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006). It is further noted that another barrier that hinders the practice of excellent PR is the lack of direct access to the CEO or even a dotted line through managers, (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006 & Grunig, 2011).

There is less prejudice and stereotyping than in the past, but it still appears that gender discrimination and stereotypes could hinder a practitioner's growth (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006). It is further suggested that practitioners may lessen discrimination and stereotyping by having a sense of their worth, participating in women's forums for support, learning about business, and demonstrating their value to the organisation (Le Roux & Steyn, 2006). It further indicates that strategists appreciate stakeholder-oriented data but are unable to justify value effectively during budgeting decisions, which in turn contains on their performance, and as a result, lack of budget is seen as a barrier to the performance of their strategic function within the organisation (Austin et al., 2000).

### **3.7 Conceptualising the role of the PR strategist**

This study's assessment of the role of the PR strategist is guided by Steyn's (2000) conceptualisation of the PR strategist role. According to Steyn and Puth (2000), the senior PR practitioner plays a strategist role as a strategist at the macro level of an organisation and adopts the mirror function. The strategic role requires the strategist to monitor the organisational environment for any development that might be a threat or opportunity to the organisation and might require the organisation to change its strategies and policies, especially concerning relationships with stakeholders (Steyn, 2018). Wiggill, Naudé, and Fourie, (2009), add that relationship building with stakeholders is an important part of strategic communication management as it contributes to the minimisation and management of organisational risk and other stakeholder issues.

The PR strategist strives to build relationships and protect corporate reputation by informing and engaging with internal and external stakeholders regularly with transparent communication (Penning & Bain, 2018). The strategist becomes a member of the decision-making team and strategically informs top management on the findings in the environment regarding stakeholders and societal issues during the development of an organisation strategy and also advises management to adjust the organisation strategies to meet stakeholders and societal expectations and in return obtain trust and legitimacy and thus a good reputation (Steyn & Bütschi, 2004).

Consequently, a PR strategist proactively anticipates changes within the environment, in return helps the organisation to adjust policies and procedures, and actively influences the environment as well as allowing the environment to influence the organisation's decisions and actions, (Angelopulo & Baker, 2013). The strategist also contributes to the development of the organisational enterprise strategy at a societal level, (Steyn, 2018). An enterprise strategy creates linkages between the value of the organisation and its managers, the expectations of its stakeholders, and societal issues that will determine its ability to sell products (Steyn & Niemann, 2010) (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). An enterprise strategy is the analysis of issues around values, social issues, and stakeholder expectations from the strategic management of an organisation, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010).



For an organisation to operate effectively within its environment, it needs to have an enterprise strategy, (Steyn & De Beer, 2012b). Organisation survival depends on the relationship between an organisation's values and its managers, the expectations of its stakeholders, and societal issues which will determine its ability to sell the organisation's products and services, (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). For the PR strategist to achieve the excellent practice of PR, there is a need for other roles that are not strategic but managerial and technician (Steyn, & Puth, 2000). Steyn and Puth (2000) conceptualised the managerial role in the context of South Africa and placed more emphasis on message development.

In conclusion, this chapter established that the role of the PR strategist should be understood within the broader scheme of the reflective paradigm of PR the reflective paradigm in PR is concerned with the environment of the organisation. It posits that the organisation should be able to see itself from outside and within the society it operates. For this function to be fully practised there should be a mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders. Therefore, for stakeholders to be considered and incorporated into the organisation strategy the reflective PR strategist needs to contribute strategically to the enterprise strategy and be part of the decision-making team. However, some barriers limit PR strategies to contribute strategically and be part of the decision-making team.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines and discusses the research methodology and methods that were used to collect and analyse data for the study. It begins by discussing and justifying the choice of qualitative methods before discussing the specific methods that were used to collect data and how they were used. The chapter proceeds to discuss the sampling methods and procedures followed in the study as well as the data analysis process. The ethical considerations made in the study are also discussed.

#### **4.2 Research methodology**

A qualitative research methodology has been used in this study, to assess PR practitioners' conceptualisation of the role of PR strategist in Lesotho. Data had to be drawn from PR practitioners and could not be numerically quantified, therefore, the qualitative research method was selected as the best approach to extrapolate the conceptualisation of PR strategists in Lesotho. Qualitative research can be understood as an approach that helps the researcher explore and form understanding of the meanings, experiences, and viewpoints of individuals or groups, (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Compared to quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasises words and description. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The strength of this research methodology is that it provides an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena and human behaviour in a real-life context, using techniques like interviews, focus groups, observations, and case studies (Tenny et al., 2017). Studies indicate that, unlike the quantitative, methodology, the qualitative approach also provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied in its natural setting by allowing participants to explain why and how they do things the way they do them, (Tenny et al., 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which was explored during the in depth-interviews with

selected PR practitioners. It is also worth noting that qualitative research is preferred when exploring new topics, understanding cultural or social contexts, and studying processes or experiences that cannot be easily quantified, (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It typically focuses on subjective interpretation, aiming to uncover patterns, themes, and underlying meanings that shape people's experiences or actions, (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **4.3 Research Paradigm**

The study has indicated that the most appropriate approach to understanding the conceptualisation of PR strategists in Lesotho is qualitative research methodology due to its quality of explaining concepts and words in their natural setting especially when exploring new topics. This section of the chapter discusses the philosophical foundations and underpinnings of qualitative research.

#### **4.3.1 Phenomenology**

Phenomenology helps to create meaning of experiences of the phenomena as viewed by individuals, (Manen, 2016). An in-depth interview makes the research participant narrate their viewpoint on the phenomenon, therefore, phenomenology is essential because it helps researchers to interpret the participant's meaning and personal narratives, (Manen, 2016). Concerning the objective of the research, this philosophy helped the researcher understand how PR practitioners in Lesotho perform and view their roles in their respective organisations as the researcher collected data using in-depth interviews to allow the participants of the study to narrate their functions.

Interpretivism assists one in understanding human experiences and actions from the viewpoint of those experiencing them by understanding how individual perspectives, experiences, society, and culture influence behaviour, (Fossey et al., 2002). Unlike positivism, which tries to find objective facts and often uses quantitative data, interpretivism is more focused on subjective meaning and context, (Bryman, 2016). This foundation is crucial as it helped the researcher to understand the meaning of the Lesotho PR functions from the PR practitioner's perspective and context which is influenced by their experience.

To obtain people's views on the social subject of the phenomenon of the study, the interpretive paradigm uses an open-ended questionnaire on a small number of the study participants, to explore the meaning that participants place on the social subject under investigation, (Phothongsunan, 2010). The researcher developed open-ended questionnaires as a guide to carry out in-depth interviews with the selected research participants. It is further indicated that the inductive approach unpacks complex data into easier-to-understanding themes, (Thomas, 2006).

The inductive approach in research involves observing patterns or specific occurrences to formulate broader generalisations or theories. This approach is especially relevant in qualitative research and based on the detailed data collected, the researcher identifies similarities to develop insights or theories, (Thomas, 2006). The inductive approach uses raw data to extract concepts, and themes for the study. The researcher begins with the area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data, and the study's findings emerge from frequent themes found in the raw data (Thomas, 2006). The inductive approach summarises the data, establishes the links between the research objectives and summarizes the findings. This approach also ensures that links are transparent and defensible, and also helps to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data (Thomas, 2006).

Using an inductive approach is helpful in exploratory research, especially when there is little existing literature on a subject, allowing researchers to derive theory from ground-up observations (Bryman, 2016). This approach has been contributed in fields such as grounded theory research, ethnography, and other areas focused on understanding complex human behaviors and social patterns (Thomas, 2006).

#### **4.4 Exploratory design**

An exploratory design is used where the researcher investigates a new issue, a problem that is not clearly defined, or where there is little attention in the literature and gives the research participants to add to the body of knowledge (Hunter et al., 2019). This design is suitable for this study Anani-Bossman (2018) and (Nyarko, 2022) indicate that there is a gap in the practice of PR in Africa countries and points out that there is a need to carry

out research studies on the practice of PR in African countries, as cultural settings influence PR models, and that, not one model can be used across the board.

#### **4.5 Research design**

In- depth interviews were used as the primary method of data collection in this study. The first stage consists of semi-structured interviews with Lesotho's senior PR practitioners, to understand the conceptualisation of their role as PR strategists. It was advantageous to use in-depth interviews for this study as they give detailed insights into the research participants' experiences (Tenny et al., 2017). In-depth interviews also cater to developing ideas, that is, they make room for follow-up questions where clarity is needed (Phothongsunan, 2010). This kind of data collection is advantageous as the technique influences the richness of data generated and gives more details than other data collection methods such as surveys, (Vasileiou et al., 2018). It also provides the perspective and experience of the interviewer on the phenomenon, (Showkat et al., 2017).

The in-depth interviews also provide accurate responses, the face-to-face communication makes it easy for the interviewer and the research participant to understand questions where needs arise, (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). The in-depth interviews are usually long and use fewer participants, less than 15, (Showkat et al., 2017). The researcher interviewed 15 professionals using a structured interview guide from various organisations in sectors ranging from regulators, insurance, banks, the Institute of Higher Learning and parastatals, and 3 CEOs, who were chosen purposively and drawn from the organisations where the PR practitioners were drawn from.

One-on-one, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the researcher, with interviewees in the comfort of their workplace. One PR professional and CEO were the exception due to work commitments and were unable to conduct face-to-face interviews. They requested the interview guide which was sent by email. The PR professional returned the questionnaire guide with answers while the CEO made a voice note through WhatsApp. Not being able to conduct the face-to-face interview was not a limitation to the study as their responses were very clear and reachable in information and the researcher found no need for further clarification.

For those that the researcher was able to conduct face-to-face interviews, the researcher was able to probe, and interviewees were also able to ask for clarification where necessary, as a result, the situation presented a relaxed and engaging environment for the two parties.

The interview time ranged between 45 minutes to 1 hour depending on how elaborate the interviewee was. The interviewees signed the consent form, and they allowed the researcher to record the interview which was done on the researcher's phone. The interviews were later subscribed to by the researcher.

To establish a reliable and authentic data-gathering process, the researcher maintained objectivity during all of the interviews with the participants. The data from interviews with the selected senior PR practitioners was triangulated with data collected using document analysis. The study used document analysis to collect and analyse documents such as job descriptions, performance agreements/indicators, and job advertisements for senior PR practitioners in Lesotho. The analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of documents in the form of text, and images, either printed or electronic is called document analysis (Bowen, 2009). Normally these documents are stored without the researcher's influence or knowledge, (Bowen 2009). Document analysis is advantageous to use as it is accurate, cost-effective, efficient, available, and lacks obstructiveness and reactivity, (Morgan, 2022). The third and last stage of the research involved interviewing selected CEOs for the companies from which participating practitioners were drawn to validate the findings. The researcher wished to interview all CEOs from the same organisations as the PR professional but due to their unavailability the researcher was only able to interview three CEOs, of which one face-to-face was not possible due to work committed yet willing to contribute to the research study.

#### **4.6 Sampling methods and procedures**

Non-probability sampling was used to identify participants in the study. The study used a purposive sampling approach to select participants for the study. The purposive sampling approach is where the researcher selects the audience as part of the research audience based on their knowledge and contribution to the study (du Plooy, 2009).

#### **4.6.1 Population**

The study population considered all senior public relations and CEOs in Maseru, and Lesotho from different organisations in different sectors. Based on the knowledge of the researcher on which organisations have a communication function, the researcher wrote letters in request to carry out the research study in the form of in-depth interviews with both senior PR practitioners and CEOs. The researcher followed-up the request letters with telephone calls to set up a date at the convenience of the interviewees. Some responded positively upon follow-ups and interview dates were set, while others declined.

#### **4.6.2 Target Population**

In this study, participants were drawn from organisations in sectors ranging from regulators, insurance, banks, Institute of Higher Learning, and parastatals. Interviews were conducted with at least two senior PR practitioners with at least five years' experience at the managerial level in the selected organisations where applicable. In other organisations, the PR function was manned by one person. CEOs who participated in this study were chosen purposively and drawn from the organisations where the PR practitioners were drawn. The advantage of using purposive sampling is that it allows one to glean data from the breadth of the sectors represented by PR practitioners in Lesotho. As argued by (Etikan, 2016) the purposive sample size is determined by saturation and not statistics.

#### **4.6.3 Sample size**

Showkat et al., (2017) state that in-depth interviews are usually long and use fewer participants, less than 15. However, the researcher wrote requesting letters to carry out the research study to 20 institutions but was able to carry out 15 face-to-face interviews with Senior PR practitioners and three CEOs. This was due to the unavailability of the research participants due to work schedules.

**Table: Overview of interview respondents**

<b>Code name</b>	<b>Name of the position</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Work experience</b>	<b>Direct report to the CEO</b>
A	Manager Public Relations	Parastatal	12 years	Middle management
B	Public relations Officer acting as Public Relations Manager	Parastatal	8 years	Middle management
C	Public Affairs Stakeholders	Regulator	21 years	Macro level
D	Communication Officer	Financial Sector	13 years	Middle management
E	Head of Sales, Distribution, Brand and Marketing	Insurance	11.5 Years	Macro level
F	Senior Marketing, Communication, and Stakeholder Manager	Parastatal	22 years	Middle management
G	PR Manager, Communication and Sponsorship	Bank	19 years	Middle management
H	Public Relations Officer	Government	11 years	Macro-Level
I	Manager Consumer Affairs and Communication	Regulator	23 years	Macro- Level
J	Public Relations Officer	Regulator	13 years	Middle Management
K	PR Manager, Communication and Sponsorship	Insurance	15 years	Middle Management
L	Public relations Officer	Government	3 years	Technical
M	Senior Information education communication	Government	13 years	Macro level
N	Communication and Marketing Officer	Tertiary Institution	7 years	Middle management



O	Head of Marketing and Communications	Bank	13 years	Macro-Level
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## 4.7 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data collected from the interviewees using in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis is described as a research method that uses systematic grouping procedures of coding and finding themes or patterns to subjectively examine the content of text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is further indicated that the purpose of this technique is to learn more about the phenomenon under study through the analysis of data that can be in the form of text, audio, or print (Naeem et al., 2023). Thematic analysis was used to analyse text by identifying common themes in documents provided for analysis (Anderson 2007). It further helps the researcher to “identify, analyse, organise, describe and report themes found in the data” (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). The data analysed from the interviews was then related to the study's theoretical framework and literature for more comprehensive interpretation.

Thematic analysis is considered in the study due to its benefit in understanding human beings (Aacharya, 2022). The method also helps in getting information from interviewers without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical views (Shava et al., 2021). Qualitative content analysis was then used to analyse data to better understand how public relations is practised in Lesotho, whether it is practiced at a strategic level.

For qualitative data analysis, data can be obtained through interviews, open-ended survey questions, and interviews, among others (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researcher used in-depth interviews to collect data from both PR practitioners and CEOs where the interview proceedings were guided by open-ended questions. The qualitative content analysis process involves the researcher familiarising with data, generating codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Nowell, et al 2017). The first stage of qualitative data analysis is for the researcher to familiarise with data collected and have an idea of what is in the data and what could be interesting for the study, (Nowell et al., 2017). The researcher first read all the transcribed data of PR professional and CEO interviews to familiarise themselves

with the data which included labelling transcripts, and labelling code for participants of the study.

The second step is to generate codes. The researcher grouped all relevant answers under each question as per the interview guide and then identified codes for each answer under each question which were in the form of phrases. According to (Nowell et al., 2017), coding enables the researcher to simplify and capture significant characteristics of the data. The researcher then grouped coding units together based on similarities and differences. The researcher then themed the coding groups and also critically assessed whether the identified themes covered all relevant information and where there was a need for adjustment. The researcher did this by adding new codes or removing unnecessary information to fill up any gaps or omissions. The reviewing stage is important as it caters to identifying missing information (Nowell et al., 2017).

The theme serves as a linkage of various concepts and experiences, where seemingly unrelated or unimportant information can be turned into something significant and cohesive. Themes give identity, meaning, and purpose (Shava et al., 2021). The researcher then defined and named themes for each theme by writing a detailed analysis and telling the story of what each theme meant. The themes were interpreted based on the existing theories which were discussed earlier in the study to construct meaning. The findings of the study are discussed in detail in researcher discusses the Chapter 5 of thesis, where data analyzed from the interviews was then related to the theoretical framework of the study and literature for a more comprehensive interpretation.

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

Research participants must be in a position to know the study's goals, methods, risks, and rewards as this approach facilitates the participants taking part in the study on a voluntary basis and knowing that they can at any point decide to stop taking part, (Kaiser, 2009). The researcher informed the participants about the purpose of the study and mentioned that taking part in the study is voluntary. Furthermore, the researcher asked participants to sign the consent form, as a gesture to agree to the terms and conditions of the study as recommended (Iphofen and Tolich 2018). This gesture ensured that there

was transparency and mutual understanding from both parties regarding their participation in the research.

The researcher further indicated to the participants that they would remain anonymous and informed them that collected data would be used strictly for the study and would remain confidential. Sanjari et al., (2014) highlight that it is important to keep participant information anonymous and protect it at all costs to protect the privacy of participants, researchers should properly anonymize data and think about employing false names or removing location and occupation details.

The researcher sought ethics clearance from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Research Ethics Committee before collecting data.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **5.0 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, a presentation and discussion of the study's findings on PR practitioners' conceptualisation of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is made. The role of the PR strategist is critical to contemporary organisations. Scholars such as Steyn and Everett, (2009), argue that for PR to add value to organisations, senior PR practitioners need to be embraced as part of the dominant coalition that contributes to decision-making by providing counsel that minimises reputational risk, increases good identity, and brings a broader societal perspective (Steyn & Everett 2009:120). This chapter specifically presents and discusses the dominant PR roles associated with the PR strategist function in Lesotho. It provides insight into whether the conceptualisation and practice of this role add value to organisations by contributing to corporate strategy and decision-making at the meso-level (Steyn, B & Puth, 2000a). It is also within the scope of the chapter to situate the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho globally by comparing it with the roles of the PR strategist in other parts of the world.

#### **5.1 PR Practitioners conceptualisations of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho**

PR strategies in Lesotho's multifaceted functions of PR that include stakeholder engagement, brand and reputation management, media relations, crisis management, environmental scanning, development of communication strategy, corporate social responsibility, and budget development. The findings of the study show that the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is largely conceptualised at the managerial, or meso level of the organisation. The majority of PR strategists do not participate in the dominant coalition where decisions are made. PR strategists in Lesotho do not contribute strategically to the attainment of the organisational goals; the development of the enterprise strategy.

### **5.1.1 Dominant functions associated with the PR strategist role in Lesotho**

According to Steyn (2009), the role of the strategist is played by a senior PR practitioner at the macro level of an organisation. The role is largely associated with the mirror function which involves monitoring environmental changes and anticipating their consequences on the organisation's policies and strategies, especially regarding the relationship with the organisation's stakeholders (Steyn, B & Puth, 2000a). A survey of the literature also shows that the role of the PR strategist plays a critical role in the organisation's decision-making processes. The data analysed in the study shows that in Lesotho, the role of PR strategist is associated with a variety of functions that include stakeholder engagement, brand and reputation management, media relations, crisis management, environmental scanning, development of communication strategy, corporate social responsibility, and budget development.

Scholars such as Steyn (2009); and Le Roux and Steyn (2006) have argued that PR roles or functions are not just indicators of power but also indicative of whether PR is involved in strategic decision-making as part of the dominant coalition or is simply there to implement decisions made by the dominant coalition. The findings of this study suggest that the dominant functions associated with the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho lean more towards the managerial role where PR narrowly implements decisions made by the dominant coalition. These findings resonate with findings from other parts of the world. In Malaysia, the senior public relations professionals still take on more of a technical role, particularly in their roles as communication liaisons and media relations experts, (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). Similarly, in Europe and America, PR Practice is dominated by the managerial role (Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Beurer-Zuellig, et al, 2009). The managerial function involves conducting research and developing communication strategies that are aligned with the corporate strategy. It focuses on both internal and external stakeholders as they contribute strategically to the corporate strategy and decision-making (Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Beurer-Zuellig et al., 2009). Fieseler, Lutz, and Meckel, (2015) indicate that in Europe the managerial role is defined by a "diagnosis" factor. This is where stakeholders' information and demands are shared in the organisation which helps decision-makers to make informed strategic decisions

### 5.1.1.1 Stakeholder management

The data analysed in the study shows that the role of the PR strategists in Lesotho is largely associated with the stakeholder engagement function. The practitioners interviewed in the study stated that it is important for stakeholders to be informed about the organisation's mandate and activities to foster positive relationships between stakeholders and the organisation. These stakeholders include the broader communities in which organisations are located, customers, employees, investors, and the public in general. This role is explained by one PR practitioner below:

*Yes, I play the role of a strategist, I am the spokesperson of the Bank, and I put communication together that goes to different mediums and for internal communication.*

*I am currently the only one in the office, I report directly to the Director. Every external communication, especially that goes to the media, goes through my office. I collect information on disaster issues from the districts and communicate it through a press release. For example, during bad weather conditions, I communicate using traditional media or social media, and I inform the public that they need to take precautions due to bad weather.*

As much as Lesotho PR professionals feel it is their role to communicate with the organisation's stakeholders, one PR professional indicated that other professionals within the institution take the role of communication and communicate to the public without PR's knowledge. PR practitioners in Lesotho use different communication channels and tactics to reach the organisation's stakeholders with different messages. PR professionals indicated they use social media, radio, newsletters, and IEC materials to engage with stakeholders using two-way symmetrical communication:

*We use two-way symmetrical communication to talk to the public, and allow them to talk to us about the products in the market and also inform them about the process they need to follow when they have grievances.*

*I use social media such as Facebook to make the public aware of harsh weather conditions that are anticipated or taking place throughout the country. Through the use of radio, I educated the public on precautions they should take to stay safe.*

PR professionals also identify strategic partners on behalf of the organisation to achieve organisational goals.

*Public relations are about lobbying strategic partners to fund different projects. The organisation receives a subvention from the government which is not enough to carry out the organisation projects of capacitating entrepreneurs. We therefore need to mobilise for grants/funds. We try to have as many partners as we can to fund our activities.*

*We strive for consistency and continuity; we liaise with community leaders through the office of the District Administrator (DA) throughout the country so that our villagers know the changes within our organisation.*

The above findings show that stakeholder engagement as conceptualized by PR professionals in Lesotho is practiced as a managerial rather than strategic function. According to Steyn (2009) the PR strategist rather engages with stakeholders to understand their societal values, norms, and expectations from the organisation. With the gathered information about stakeholders' societal needs, the PR strategist strategically presents stakeholders' needs values, and expectations during the development of the enterprise development (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). Thus, PR strategists strive to build and maintain a good relationship with the organisation's stakeholders and create a positive reputation through communication while addressing their needs and expectations (Anani-Bossman, 2021). However, the data analysed suggests that the stakeholder engagement role of the PR strategist as conceptualised in Lesotho focuses more on engaging with stakeholders with a view to just informing them about the organisation's mandate, products, and services and not necessarily addressing their social needs. Extant studies show that this function is played more by the technician at a micro level of the organisation, as this role does not form part of the decision-making team but rather generates communication messages needed to carry out communication programs

(Steyn & Puth 2000). Therefore, PR strategists in Lesotho's engagement with stakeholders is not strategic as it does not focus on meeting stakeholders' societal needs.

#### **5.1.1.2 Development of policies and strategies**

The findings of the study indicate that one of the roles associated with the PR strategist in Lesotho is that of developing and implementing the organisation's communication strategy that is then aligned with the organisation's strategy. Communication strategy guides on what to say to different stakeholders using different communication channels. PR professionals in Lesotho indicated that in addition to developing communication strategies, they develop social media strategies that include a communication plan and crisis management plan. One PR strategist indicated that they develop policies with consideration of how they will affect their stakeholders. They understand that stakeholders have an influence on the operation of the organisation and that their perception of the organisation matters. This role is spelt out below:

*My role involves developing policy and strategy. When developing policies, I address the public's needs and make sure that the public is aware of policies that protect them, we use the public policy model. I develop communication strategies, creating comprehensive plans to effectively communicate key messages and objectives to target audiences.*

*In terms of the framework, the communication strategy is drawn from the organisation's strategy, we might adjust our communication strategy a little, based on the strategy review we just had. It pointed out that we need to talk to our stakeholder more and understand their perception. I believe we have a lot of opportunities to help us to make our stakeholders understand our function as they only know about tariffs. When developing the communication strategy, we also benchmark with our peers in the region. I draw the communication strategy from the organisation strategy. I make sure that it is implemented then draw a feedback strategy mechanism.*

The PR professionals who participated in the study pointed out that when developing policies, they consider their stakeholders' needs while others indicated that they develop



communication strategies and plans that are targeted to effectively communicate key messages to stakeholders. As reflected in the quote above, the PR strategist interacts with stakeholders to understand their social needs. It can then be argued that when developing communication policies, the PR strategists in Lesotho are proactive. A proactive approach is where the PR strategist decides based on a prediction of what could happen to stakeholders if certain policies were implemented (Steyn & Puth 2000). It is further highlighted that the reflective strategist makes management aware of stakeholders' values, norms, and expectations while achieving organisational goals and recommends action to be taken to address stakeholders and societal issues while maintaining a solid reputation and a social permit to operate, (Steyn, 2018).

Steyn and Puth (2000) argue that one of the key functions of the PR strategist is that of contributing to the development of the enterprise strategy. The findings of the study show that the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is not associated with the development of the enterprise strategy but more with the development of the communication strategy. PR strategists in Lesotho develop communication strategies to have targeted messages that address their stakeholders. They also develop communication strategies that are aligned with corporate strategy. The PR professionals develop the communication strategies and decides "what", "when" and "how" this should address stakeholder issues or take advantage of opportunities for the organisation and develop communication strategies that are aligned with the organisation's strategy, vision, mission, and values (Steyn, B & Puth, 2000b). An assessment of literature shows that this role of strategy development as understood and practiced in Lesotho speaks more to the managerial function in PR which takes place at the macro level of the organisation (Steyn & Puth 2000). Arguably, the PR strategist role in Lesotho is associated with the window function where PR professionals engage the organisation's stakeholders through communication about the organisation's mandate and activities. The role of PR professionals here involves processing information inward; gathering information, informing management, and contributing to the development or adjustment of policies. It is worth mentioning that these contributions do not involve the development of the enterprise strategy as there was no mention of the development of the enterprise strategy.

### 5.1.1.3 Brand building and reputation management

PR professionals in Lesotho view brand building and reputation management as key roles of the PR strategists. They believe protecting the reputation of the organisation and that of the industry contributes to the attainment of organisational goals. This role and its importance is captured below from some of the participants:

*My strategic role involves building the brand, being the custodians of the brand and creating demand through marketing strategies. Through the operation department we deliver the promise that we are here for our stakeholders when they need our products. I protect the image of the organisation and that of the industry and keep stakeholders informed about the organisation's activities.*

*The strategic role of PR is to protect the reputation of the organisation and develop a communication strategy that helps to reach out to different stakeholders using different platforms. I manage the brand and the brand is inclusive of the reputation of the Bank. The Bank in its nature is a business of a trusted institution. We therefore need to inject a positive image into Basotho. When our customers have trust in us, they believe that we will take care of their money and therefore it's an attraction strategy for the Bank as a result makes interest for the Bank*

In addition to the protection of the brand and reputation, PR professionals view their strategic role as extending to procure branding materials for their respective organisations. Penning and Bain (2018), argue that the role of a PR strategist in an organisation is to build relationships with stakeholders and protect corporate reputation by regularly informing and engaging with internal and external stakeholders with transparent communication. Extant literature further indicates the importance of the PR strategist as a member of the decision-making team that informs top management on the environment regarding stakeholders and societal issues during the development of an organisation strategy, advises management to adjust strategies and policies to meet stakeholders, societal expectations and behave ethically and responsibly and in return obtain trust and legitimacy and thus a good reputation (Steyn & Bütschi 2004). Scholars

further indicate that the long-term strategic role allows the practitioner to have an overall perspective of the corporation and its environment. This role puts the organisation's reputation first and as a result, strives to create a good relationship with trust between the organisation and its public and stakeholders (Mellado & Barría, 2012). Practitioners in this role also develop long-term strategies to anticipate possible contingencies (Mellado & Barría, 2012).

The study findings show that PR strategists in Lesotho maintain the organisation's reputation by communicating with stakeholders about the organisation's activities instead forming long-term relationships that have value in addressing their social needs and in return create loyalty and good reputation (Steyn & Bütschi 2004). Long-term relations that have value are achieved through gathering information to understand stakeholder social needs and adjusting corporate strategies and policies aligned to environmental changes to cater for now and in the future (Steyn & Puth 2000). These findings cohere with previous studies in Latin America where the long-term strategic role of PR involves having an overall perspective of the corporation and its environment. This role puts the organisation's reputation first by striving to create a trust and a good relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders (Mellado & Barría, 2012).

PR professional's conceptualisation of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is blurred. While brand management and reputation management are key roles associated with the role of the PR strategist, as they help the organisational to achieve its goals and also promote its reputation, culture, and core values other ancillary roles identified such as the creation of brand identity and brand awareness are not strategic functions associated with the role of the PR strategist. As argued above, the role of the PR strategist involves gathering intelligence on stakeholder and societal needs as suggested by Steyn, (2018) which is then utilized in reputation and brand management. The data analysed does not show the key role of interacting with the environment to gather information to understand it and identify changes that will create opportunities or harm the organisation.

#### **5.1.1.4 Media Relations**

PR professionals in Lesotho view media relations as another function that is performed by PR strategists. They indicated that the media is one important stakeholder that they

need to maintain positive relations to benefit from positive and constant coverage of the organisation's activities. They further elaborated that this function involves organising press conferences, draft press releases, and liaising with the media. This is reflected in the sentiments of a PR manager captured below:

*The PR strategist is also responsible for liaison with the media, answering queries, organising press conferences, and issuing press releases.*

*It involves cultivating relationships with journalists, editors, bloggers, and other media professionals to secure positive coverage for their clients.*

PR professionals in Lesotho indicated that the PR strategist function involves communicating with the organisation's stakeholders through traditional media, social media, and print material to disseminate the organisation's mandate, products, and services. They indicated that the PR strategist liaises with the media by answering media inquiries, drafting press releases, and organising press conferences. The media relations role captured above is largely associated with the PR technician role which involves implementation and is associated with the press agency model of communication (Steyn, B & Puth, 2000b). This role, which is not strategic involves the PR technician disposing of information through the inside-out approach, (Steyn, 2009).

#### **5.1.1.5 Crisis management**

Crisis management is the other function associated with the PR strategist role in Lesotho. One PR strategist indicated that they have crisis management strategies that guide the handling of crises to mitigate potential damage to the organisation's reputation. This role is explained below by one of the participants:

*We have a crisis management strategy that has a diagnosis chart that guides on who can handle the crisis. In a case where the issue is very sensitive, the matter needs to be consulted with management. If not, it can be handled within the communication department. Effective management of crises also helps the protection of the organisation's reputation. Our strategies are reactive, not proactive when it comes to issue management.*

The above function appears to be more managerial than strategic. Crisis management becomes strategic when it is managed proactively rather than reactively. The strategic role of public relations is emphasised in public relations literature as having an impact on crisis management and decision-making (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). Communication is considered to be more effective during a crisis with a special focus on what the organisation should say and do during a crisis as there is a need for information sharing. It is further noted that crises partially create uncertainty, and uncertainty fosters confusion and, in some cases, terror (Zimal & Aysar, 2021).

In crisis management PR strategists in Lesotho, diagnose crises and determine the communication channel to use to manage crises. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the PR strategist to provide sound counselling to management during crisis management and contribute significantly to the intention and action of accountability, transparency, and integrity of the organisation's response (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). Steyn, (2009) further reflects that the reflective strategist strives to resolve the conflict between the organisation and its stakeholders amicably to maintain good relations between the two parties.

#### **5.1.1.6 Environmental Scanning**

Grunig (2011) argues that monitoring of media and political activities as part of environmental scanning is managerial and not strategic as these approaches are often reactive not proactive, revealing issues too late to influence outcomes. According to Steyn, environmental scanning becomes strategic when it involves monitoring of the environment and acting as a bridge between the organisation and its stakeholders by explaining stakeholders' expectations, norms, and values to management and also making management aware of the organisation's policies and the impact on strategic stakeholders (Steyn 2009). The findings of the study show that the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho regarding environmental scanning is largely managerial because it is limited to monitoring the environment by listening to the radio, cutting newspaper clips, and monitoring the organisation's social media page and word-of-mouth comments:

*The strategic role involves monitoring what is being said about the organisation by listening to the radio, monitoring the social media pages,*

*especially Facebook pages, reading a weekly newspaper, and cutting or highlighting relevant sections regarding our organisation and sector.*

*The role involves tracking media coverage of the organisation's initiatives and public sentiment, analysing data and feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaigns and adjust as needed.*

Steyn (2009) contends that for a PR strategist to contribute strategically to the attainment of the organisations goal, they should gather intelligence through environmental scanning and use this intelligence to influence the dominant coalition and the strategic direction the of the Organisation.

#### **5.1.1.7 Corporate Social Responsibility**

According to Jayiya et al., (2022) the role of the PR reflective strategist involves engaging with stakeholders during the planning and implementation phase of CSR, (Jayiya et al., 2022). The study found that stakeholder engagement plays a critical role in CSR. The study findings indicate that PR professionals in Lesotho consider the CSR function as a key role of the PR strategist. However, within Lesotho, this function is reactive rather than proactive because it entails waiting for sponsorship requests from the public or identifying the gap and then taking the initiative. This is encapsulated below:

*We do a lot of CSR, we help vulnerable groups such as abused women, and orphanages, by providing Wi-Fi services throughout the year. We also sponsor students who excel in communication courses at the tertiary level.*

*Regarding CSR, there is a policy that looks into the tertiary level, we sponsor individual students, in economics, and water engineering, and we also have internships. We need people to know about us, about this program.*

CSR plays a key role in organisations by increasing their legitimacy within society (Anon, 2005). For organisations to achieve the goal of meeting stakeholders and societal expectations, values, norms, and standards, stakeholders need to see companies being socially responsible towards the environment, stakeholders, and society, at large (Steyn

& Niemann, 2010). In the context of Lesotho, the role of the strategist can become more strategic by involving stakeholders proactively in identifying, developing, implementing and assessing CSR interventions as advised by Jayiya, et al., (2022). This will allow organisations to interacting with stakeholders to understand their needs, values, and expectations in so far as CSR is concerned.

### **5.1.2 Overview of findings on the dominant roles of the PR strategist in Lesotho**

The findings of the study show that PR professionals conceptualization of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho are not in sync with the role of the PR strategist as conceptualized by scholars such as Steyn (2009). Most of the roles identified as strategic are largely managerial and often involves technical roles as well. These findings are not new. They resonate with Meintjes (2011) observation that the technician and managerial roles are the most dominant roles practised in the Common Monetary Area (CMA). CMA countries include Lesotho, South Africa, Eswatini, and Namibia. Van Heerden and Rensburg, (2005), have also previously observed the blurred lines and overlaps between the strategic and managerial roles in most African countries. However, these findings differ with (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020) study conducted in Zimbabwe where they argue that there is a clear demarcation between the three roles of PR that is the strategic role, the managerial role, and the technician role and that corporate communication is understood and practised as a strategic function like it is practised in the western countries.

### **5.1.3 Value addition of PR strategist to organisations in Lesotho**

Research on PR roles shows that PR can only add value to organisations when it is practised as a strategic function that contributes to the development of the organisation's strategy and decision-making at the macro organisational level (Steyn, & Puth, 2000a; Holmström, 2002; Gilaninia, Taleghani & Mohammadi, 2013; de Poll, Beijer & Alves, 2022). However, for PR to achieve this value addition in organisations, PR strategists need to be embraced as part of the dominant coalition in the organisation. This positioning

will allow PR practitioners to contribute strategically to the attainment of organisational goals by influencing organisations to adjust their policies and strategies to suit both the organisation and its stakeholders (Roach, 2016).

#### **5.1.3.1 PR strategists and the dominant coalition in Lesotho**

The findings of this study show that most senior PR practitioners in Lesotho who are supposed to perform the strategic role are not part of the dominant coalition that contributes strategically to the development of the enterprise strategy and decision-making within organisations. Rather, senior PR strategists are largely considered to be part of middle management that implements decisions made by the dominant coalition. This position is captured below by one senior PR practitioner:

*PR is not part of executive management, I am in middle management, I am a member of the projects committee which comprises different managers from different departments. The purpose of the committee is to mobilise funds for the organisation's projects.*

One major contextual factor that prevents senior PR practitioners from being part of the dominant coalition in Lesotho is that PR is not viewed as a strategic function but more as an appendage of other divisions like marketing, human resources, law, or finance. The data analysed in the study shows that a significant number of PR professionals interviewed were in departments that fall under Marketing. Consequently, the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is not adding value to organisations because senior PR practitioners are not operating at the macro-organisational level where they can directly influence policy, the enterprise strategy, and stakeholder values and norms (see Van Heerde & Rensburg, 2005). This finding shows parallels to the status quo in Malaysia where PR is not contributing strategically to the achievement of the organisation's goal due to factors such as the exclusion of PR professionals from the dominant coalition (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). The above finding on the exclusion of senior PR professionals from the dominant coalition in Lesotho is corroborated by CEOs who participated in the study who believe PR could add more value to their organisation:



*Currently, PR is not part of the dominant coalition that makes decisions on the organisation's behalf. If I could change it, the PR function would form part of the dominant coalition and advise management on important issues such as communication; it is important to know what to communicate, when and to whom.*

*PR has to be part of the dominant coalition, and I consider it as best practice, even if the manager does not sit in the executive, but needs to be part of the management team. I believe the best practice is for PR to be part of the managerial team that makes decisions. Whatever decisions are made PR needs to be aware of.*

Steyn and Niemann (2014) posit that the PR strategist should form part of the dominant coalition to advise management on the values, needs, and expectations of stakeholders and contribute strategically to the development of the enterprise strategy. However, CEOs in Lesotho tend to have a narrow view strategic function of PR strategists. They conceptualise their role as limited to advising management on communication skills, developing targeted messages that are clear and concise to stakeholders, liaising with the media, and striving to protect the organisation's image and reputation. This suggests that even though CEOs wish that PR strategists could form part of the dominant coalition, they do not know and understand the broader strategic role that PR strategists can and should play within their organisations. They view the strategist function from the viewpoint of a technician and manager as opposed to a strategist. This lack of understanding of the strategic role of PR professionals prevent PR from fully adding value to their organisations

However, although the data analysed in the study shows that most organisations studied exclude PR strategists from the dominant coalition in Lesotho, there are a few organisations that have embraced senior PR practitioners function as part of the dominant coalition. This is reflected in the quotation below:

*I am part of the executive management (dominant coalition) and report directly to the CEO. like any other discipline, I am regarded as a specialist*

*even though at times it is challenging when there are disagreements regarding my advice on communication-related issues. There is nothing that happens within the organisation that my division does not know, I am part of the dominant coalition.*

As argued earlier, the findings show that PR serves as part of the dominant coalition, their role is limited to providing counsel only on communicated related matters. Some of the contextual factors that prevent PR professionals from adding more value to their organisations as strategists in Lesotho include limited human resources. The data analysed shows that most PR departments in Lesotho employ one PR person who has to perform all three functions: the strategic role, the managerial role and the technician's role. Being a member-dominant coalition enables practitioners to learn more about business, expand their business knowledge, and establish their reputation. The insights gleaned from interviews with CEOs in Lesotho show that while they believe PR strategists should be part of executive management who keep abreast with organisational activities and decisions they expect little from them in so far as broader decision-making and the development of the enterprise strategy is concerned.

#### **5.1.3.2 PR strategist's role in counselling management**

PR research has shown that PR can only add value to organisations when it is practised as a strategic function that contributes to the development of the organisation's strategy and decision-making at the macro organisational level (Steyn, & Puth, 2000a; Holmström, 2002; Gilaninia, Taleghani & Mohammadi, 2013; de Poll, Beijer & Alves, 2022). However, for PR to achieve this value addition in organisations, PR strategists need to be embraced as part of the dominant coalition in Organisation where they can provide counsel to management on a wide variety of strategic issues impacting on the Organisation. The study findings show that the exclusion of PR Professionals in Lesotho from the dominant coalition where they can provide counsel to senior management curtails their ability to add value to organisations. The data analysed in the study shows that PR professional's strategic contribution to their organisations is limited to providing counsel to management only on stakeholder-related issues. This view is echoed by CEOs who participated in this

study who pointed out that PR professionals are not being fully utilised as management rarely seek strategic insights from them. Engagement with CEOs further shows that PR professionals are not largely seen as strategists and specialists in most organisations in Lesotho. They are largely viewed as technicians whose role is synonymous with press agency and publicity.

As observed above, the strategic role of PR in so far as counselling management is concerned in Lesotho is confined to stakeholders' values, norms, and expectations. PR professionals advise management on issues that affect stakeholders and that are of benefit to both stakeholders and the organisation. In the cases analysed, the study observes that some PR professionals have provided counsel to management on key issues affecting their organisations. A case in point is that of a PR professional who advised management on the use of handheld transceivers (HT). Due to high theft in Lesotho, communities have resorted to the use of HT for ease of communication during robbery. The problem with these communication tools interfered with the telecommunications spectrum, and management was threatening their discontinuation. However, the PR practitioner was able to convince them not to discontinue:

*I advised management that the discontinuation of handheld transceivers (HT) would not only disgruntle the community but would also increase theft, rather than let there be guidelines on the use of these devices. Upon approval, guidelines were developed in collaboration with the technical team, and they were approved.*

Another example related to advice provided to management is on the adoption and use of a tourism application by a PR practitioner in the tourism sector:

*I have advised management on the adoption and use of a tourism app that is user-friendly for our stakeholders. This app helps them to locate their destinations easily.*

Although limited to stakeholder needs, the advice and counsel provided by the aforementioned PR practitioners to management constitutes the strategic role of PR.

Previous studies show that the role of the PR strategist adds value to organisations when PR helps the organisation to solve problems amicably and satisfy both stakeholders as well as management, (Grunig, 2008). Weder, (2022) further posits that the current sustainability movement emphasises the importance of including stakeholders in corporate choices as it relates to the social license to operate.

#### **5.1.3.3 PR strategist's role in anticipating crises and crisis management**

Scholars such as Grunig (2008) have argued that the PR strategist also adds value to organisations when PR professionals help the organisation identify issues and resolve them before they become a crisis. They espouse the criticality of solving problems amicably and satisfying both management and stakeholders (Grunig, 2008). Weder, (2022). The findings of the study show that due to the limited nature of the environmental scanning conducted by PR professionals in Lesotho, few PR professionals who participated in the study have the skills to identify issues that might harm the organisation and stakeholders at the meso Organisational level.

As argued by Steyn (2009) environmental scanning becomes strategic and aids in anticipating crises when it involves monitoring the environment and acting as a bridge between the organisation and its stakeholders by explaining stakeholders' expectations, norms, and values to management and also making management aware of the organisation's policies and the impact on strategic stakeholders (Steyn 2009). It should therefore be proactive and employed to scan the environment and identify issues before they become crises. This anticipatory role is captured by one senior PR professional in Lesotho below:

*In my capacity, I can anticipate what could happen in a case where grant payments are not issued on time. I make it my assignment to enquire about payment status during executive meetings and if there are hiccups, I come up with solutions, and if it fails and needs a higher-ranking intervention I follow up until the issue is resolved.*

The strategic role performed by PR professionals in Lesotho highlighted above is similar to the role performed by PR professionals in Turkey and the US (Tugce & Eyun-Jung,

2020). In the US, PR professionals mitigate disputes between parties and promote communication and mutual respect to reach an amicable agreement (Tugce & Eyun-Jung, 2020). On the other hand, in Malaysia, Senior public relations practitioners are valued during crisis management (Mat Tazin & Kaur, 2017). Thus in Turkey, the United States, and Malaysia, PR adds value during crisis management with stakeholders playing an important role. Similarly, in Lesotho, PR professionals play a limited strategic role in advising management on issues before they become crises.

#### **5.1.3.4 PR strategists involvement in strategy development in Lesotho**

One of the ways through which the PR strategists is supposed to add value to the Organisation is through contributing to the development of the organisational enterprise strategy at a societal level as part of the dominant coalition (Steyn, 2018). An enterprise strategy fundamentally creates linkages between the value of the Organisation, its managers, the expectations of its stakeholders, and societal issues that will determine its ability to sell products (Steyn & Niemann, 2010), (Steyn & Niemann, 2014). An enterprise strategy constitutes an analysis of issues around values, social issues, and stakeholder expectations from the strategic management of an organisation (Steyn & Niemann, 2010). Building on European literature of the reflective strategist, Steyn (2009) contents that the PR strategist should be viewed as a reflective strategist who informs management on societal values, norms, and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behaviour.

The findings of this study shows that senior PR professionals in Lesotho are not part of the dominant coalition and as a consequence do not add any value to their organisations by contributing to the enterprise strategy. Rather, PR professionals in Lesotho are only involved in the development of the communication strategy after the enterprise strategy has been developed by the dominant coalition. This exclusion from the development of the enterprise strategy comes out clearly in the quotes below:

*I am not involved that much, I only get to be involved when I have to implement the strategy. I draw the communication plan out of the strategy. We also advise on the implementation of the strategy. I usually become a*

*silent member during the development of the strategy, I am invited so that I can appreciate terminologies and how certain decisions were reached.*

*PR involvement spans from shaping the brand's narrative to aligning communication efforts with broader strategic initiatives. One responded, Our involvement includes understanding public perception, stakeholder relationships, and media dynamics to inform strategic decision-making.*

*In the development of the Bank strategy the marketing manager is involved, and we are involved when it comes to the communication strategy*

The above quotations show that most organisations in Lesotho do not consider PR professionals as part of the dominant coalition that develops the enterprise strategy. Thus for PR to add value addition to organisations in Lesotho, PR strategists need to be embraced as part of the dominant coalition. This positioning will allow PR practitioners to contribute strategically to the attainment of organisational goals by influencing organisations to adjust their policies and strategies to suit both the organisation and its stakeholders (Roach, 2016).

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **6.0 INTRODUCTION**

Previous studies have sought to understand how best PR can be practised such that it adds value to organisations (Steyn, & Puth, 2000). Grunig's Excellence theory is the most popular theory to emerge from studies on PR roles. It contends that for PR to add more value to organisations it needs to be situated at the macro-level where it contributes to corporate or enterprise strategy. However, a review of PR-related literature has revealed that many of these studies remain biased toward the experiences of the global North, with fewer studies focusing on Africa. Scholars such as Anani-Bossman, (2021), have identified the need to research PR roles in African countries to understand current practice. Very little is understood about PR roles and whether they add value to organisations in countries such as Lesotho. This study sought to breach this gap by assessing the role of the PR strategist as conceptualised and practised in Lesotho, a country where PR research is scant. It was also within the purview of the study to assess whether the role of the PR strategist as it is conceptualised in Lesotho adds value to organisations.

#### **6.1 Key Findings from Literature**

Public relations roles have evolved from traditional to more strategic communication functions, that are versatile and digital savvy. (Fieseler et al., 2015). Broom and Dozier (1986) provide a dichotomy of the managerial role and the technical role. They argue that the managerial role is more involved in decision-making on communication-related issues, development of communication policy, and taking full responsibility for the outcomes of implemented communication programs (Steyn, 2000). The technical role of PR, on the other hand, implements policy and decisions made by others in a manner that has been decided by top management (Penning & Bain, 2018). The technical role is more involved in the production of communication material, journalist skills; writing and editing, liaison with media, implementing communication programs, and not participating in any decision-making meetings (Steyn, 2000).

The PR strategist role was conceptualised due to the shortcomings of the two, aforementioned traditional roles. Furthermore, the strategist role was associated with the mirror function, to answer to the ever-changing environment (Steyn, B & Puth, 2000b). The study also revealed that the strategic role of PR is considered to include the monitoring of the environment and anticipation of how policy formulation and adjustments will affect stakeholders. Most important to this role is the consideration of the effects of such developments on the relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders. Once these tasks have been carried out, the PR strategist then informs management of the findings during the development of a corporate strategy (Steyn, B & Puth, 2000b). This role is played at the macro level of the organisation, where decisions are made. In this study, the managerial role was also redefined to suit the South African context, including the development of communication strategies and policies that are aligned with the corporate strategy. The manager is also expected to draw messages and know what should be said to stakeholders to manage a crisis.

Scholars like Steyn (2009) have argued that the PR strategist should be viewed as a reflective strategist who informs management on societal values, norms, and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behaviour. The reflective paradigm, which this professional's role is grounded in, is concerned with the environment of the organisation. It suggests that the organisation should be able to see itself from outside and within the society it operates (Holmström, 2002). In addition, Steyn and Niemann, (2010), suggest that enterprise strategy is a relevant plan to incorporate societal and stakeholder expectations, values, norms, and standards into the organisation's strategy development process. Enterprise strategy is developed in organisations within the context of enterprise governance to help the organisation achieve non-financial goals, which is sustainability (Steyn & Niemann, 2014).



## **6.2 Key Findings of the study**

### **6.2.1 Conceptualisation of the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho**

The role of the PR strategist in Lesotho is associated with a variety of functions that include stakeholder engagement, brand and reputation management, media relations, crisis management, environmental scanning, development of communication strategy, corporate social responsibility, and budget development. Most PR strategists are performing managerial functions and do not occupy a seat in the dominant coalition where decisions are made. In other organisations, the communication department is manned by one person which would suggest that all the three roles are performed by one person. Even in the case where there is more than one PR practitioner, there is still no clear distinction of roles between the strategic, managerial and technical role.

Engagement with stakeholders seemed to be the major function that PR strategists in Lesotho performed. This role is narrowly confined to sending out organisation messages to stakeholders regarding the organisation's mandate, products, and services. During the development of the organisation strategy, few PR professionals are involved and consulted. Rather, their role is confined to developing the communication strategy that is aligned with the organisation strategy. The PR practitioners in Lesotho do environmental scanning by monitoring both traditional and social media. However, the monitoring of media and political activities as part of environmental scanning is traditional and not strategic as this role is often reactive not proactive.

### **6.2.2 The PR strategist and value addition in Lesotho**

For PR to achieve value addition to organisations, the PR strategist needs to be embraced as part of the dominant coalition in the organisation as the position caters to the strategic contribution. However, the findings of this study indicate that most senior PR practitioners in Lesotho are not part of the dominant coalition, and do not contribute strategically to the development of the enterprise strategy and decision-making within organisations. Rather, senior PR strategists are largely considered to be part of middle management that implements decisions made by the dominant coalition. However, data further indicates

that CEOs in Lesotho feel that PR strategists should be part of the executive management as they must be abreast with organisational activities and decisions.

CEOs in Lesotho view PR strategists as contributing to the attainment of the organisation's goal by performing managerial and technician functions and not that of strategists where understanding of social needs of stakeholders, advising management, and contributing strategically to the development of enterprise strategy is critical. CEOs in Lesotho understand that PR strategists add value when they advise management on communication-related issues that include liaison with media, stakeholder engagement, reputation management, crisis management, and simplifying language to suit the targeted audience. Researchers confirm that when CEOs and board members consider the issues at hand, communication specialists are seldom considered the first choice, they usually come as an afterthought, and directors and CEO are not aware of the development in the field of communication that communication can contribute strategically to the attainment of the organisation's goals.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Further research should explore the views of CEOs on the role of the PR strategist in Lesotho. Currently, there is no known study in Lesotho that has examined how CEOs understand the strategist's role and their contribution to it's the achievement of the organisational goals. Such research would contribute significantly to the existing literature on the strategic role of PR in Africa. Additionally, studies focusing on the strategic contribution of PR strategists in other African countries will expand knowledge from a global South perspective. Such studies will also provide more insight into how contexts influence the conceptualization, practice and effectiveness of PR strategists.

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